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NEXT GENERATION

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April 1998

Metal Gear Solid

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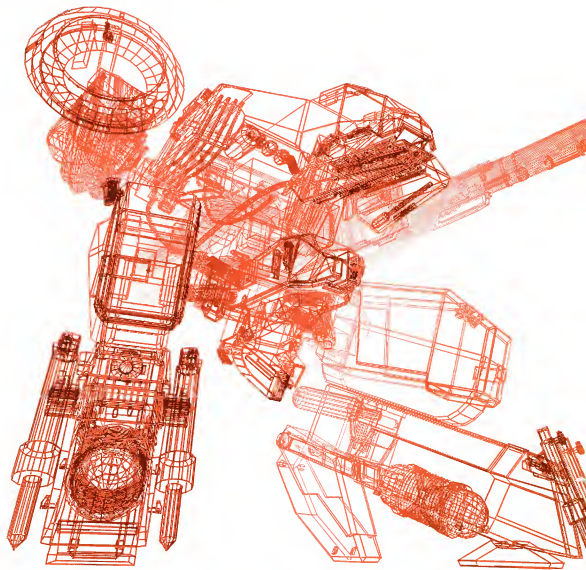
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greatest
failures

What went wrong — a
Next Generation report

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40

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Will profit kill creativity?

The numbers are in from 1997, and it was a banner year. Console sales grew more than 52% in 1997 over 1996. In December alone, the game industry grossed more than a billion dollars, and already, 1998 is on track to be the best year ever for computer and videogame sales.

The biggest factor in this growth was new hardware, which enabled different types of games. But as this generation of hardware begins to age, prices will come down further and the market will open up to more casual gamers.

This is a critical time for the industry.

If publishers rely on the established game styles that entertained early adopters to satisfy new consumers, they may see short term gains but risk alienating hardcore gamers — the ones who drive sales. This is the trap the industry fell into at the end of the 16-bit era when it collapsed under the weight of hundreds of generic platform games.

Which is why this month we pay tribute to Konami's upcoming *Metal Gear Solid*, a game that not only manages to have all the visual appeal gamers have come to expect, but

also adds innovation and shows a commitment to quality that others would do well to follow. The full story begins on page 52.



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GENERATION

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The **Next Generation Disc** gives you the full picture in 550 megabytes of information you won't find anywhere else

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There is no substitute to seeing a game in action

special

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Snowboard Kids,
Space Bunnies Must Die



talking

Gaming legend
Richard Garriott
talks about his
other huge project,
Ultima Online



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The April edition of the **Next Generation Disc** contains the second part of our world exclusive interview with Origin's Richard Garriott, as the gaming legend discusses his other flagship game, *Ultima Online*. In addition, the makers of *Snowboard Kids* and *Space Bunnies Must Die* talk about their latest games.

Every month, we publish two editions of the magazine — one comes with a disc, the other doesn't. For any and all subscription inquiries, call (800) 678-3643. We welcome your feedback at disceditors@next-generation.com. Or go to www.next-generation.com/ncdrom for more information.

talking

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ng special

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previews

Gran Turismo,
Einhander, Shot,
Bloody Roar



Einhander

Platform: PlayStation
Developer: Space Gun
Publisher: Sony
Genre: Action

finals

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internet


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pc

Uprising (3Dx),
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Hiss! Boo! It's the game company we love to hate! Or, at least, we used to. Acclaim's cleaned up its act and claims the "bad old days" of stepping on other names on cheap games are just a nasty 16-bit dream. "We've learned an expensive lesson," says Chairman and CEO Greg Fischbach, as **Next Generation** returns.

A man with dark hair, wearing a dark, heavy coat and light-colored trousers, stands on a rocky beach. In the background, a wooden pier or breakwater extends into the ocean under a cloudy sky. The overall tone is somber and atmospheric.

To hell and back with **Acclaim**



Back in the days of Super NES and Genesis, you couldn't swing a joystick without hitting mountains of carts based on big movie tie-ins and superhero cash-ins: Rambo, Hulk Hogan, Batman, Arnold Schwarzenegger, The Simpsons, Bruce Lee. The list could go on. Typically these types of games all sucked. Typically they got slammed by the press. Typically the gameplay consisted of walking in a straight line, then punching, kicking, and "special-moving" brainless enemies. Typically the name on the box was Acclaim.

As the 16-bit systems gave way to PlayStation and Nintendo 64, the market for such asinine entertainment crashed. Acclaim found itself with too much money invested in too many games that clearly couldn't be sold at full price. The company almost went under.

But Acclaim refused to die. It fought hard to survive, regrouped, adopted a whole new strategy, and is now beginning to regain much of its former swagger. Its gamble of purchasing development studios Iguana Entertainment, Probe Software, and Sculptured Studios has already paid off with *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* and *Quarterback Club*. It looks set to hit the jackpot again soon with *Forsaken* and *Shadow Man*.

So how has Acclaim managed to turn itself around? What's the secret of its new success? And why did it release so many sucky platform games in the first place? **Next Generation** met with Acclaim's Chairman and CEO Greg Fischbach at the company's headquarters in Glen Cove, New York.

Big names, bad games

NG: Before we talk about the present and the future, let's talk about the past. And let's get one thing straight from the outset, Acclaim games used to suck. Can you admit that?

Greg: Can I deny reality? Certainly there were a lot of games that didn't sell well.

Acclaim was built on a half dozen different products, and that's where we got the strength to go forward. Look at *Mortal Kombat*. The first game sold six million copies worldwide, the second sold four million units. The original *NBA Jam* sold four million copies, the *Tournament Edition* sold another two million. These are huge numbers. They are so big that you can hide a lot of not-so-good stuff in-between these big hits.

NG: Let's talk about that not-so-good stuff. There's no denying that *Mortal Kombat* and *NBA Jam* were very popular. But back in the early 1990s, a bunch of terrible games found their way into the hands of unsuspecting gamers, courtesy of Acclaim.

Greg: We were a different company back then. Besides, when you're dealing in issues of quality, someone's making a decision as to what's good quality and what's not. It's a subjective thing. Entertainment doesn't deal in areas of absolutes. You and I weren't always going to agree on what's good, what's bad, and what's indifferent.

NG: During this period, do you think Acclaim was an asset or a liability to the videogame industry? By forcing a bunch of "not-so-good," or B-grade, games into the marketplace, you may have put off a lot of people from playing videogames for good.

Greg: You talk about B-grade games, but you could say the same thing about B-movies, and should you release them? I don't know of any movie that set out to be a B-movie. Everyone aims for the top, and yet most will fail. Similarly, I don't know of any game that sets out to be a B-game.

NG: But Acclaim did deliberately set out to release B-games? It's obvious that your strategy was to spend a lot of money securing a big-name license and then spend a lot more money marketing it. The game itself was of little importance and was developed on a relatively tiny budget.

Greg: OK, but what effect did this have on the industry? Personally, I don't think that you can say that a company releasing B-grade product had a bad effect on the industry. I don't think that because B-grade product was released to the marketplace people stopped playing games. Look at it this way — I was in the music industry for a long time, I know firsthand that some awful records were released, and yet people haven't stopped listening to music.

NG: Fair enough. But why, instead of investing in gameplay quality, did

talking



Acclaim used to spend so much money on big-name licenses and marketing in the first place?

Greg: The nature of the videogame business was different back in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Up until 1995 and 1996, hit games came from three places. Either they came from the hardware companies, such as Nintendo with Mario and Sega with Sonic, or they came from the arcade, such as Capcom with Street Fighter 2 and Midway with Mortal Kombat. Or they came from licenses. We weren't a hardware company, and back then we didn't have an arcade division, so we had to go with licenses.

It's a strategy we've been criticized for, but it was the only way we could get our products into retail.

NG: Into retail? All publishers have to sell their games to retail, convince them that they're going to do good numbers before retail will place them in their stores, sure. And you're saying that, at the time, retail wanted big-name licenses?

Greg: I remember having a conversation with a buyer for a large chain of retail stores, and we would bring him titles like *Wizards* and

In 1996 it seemed that we couldn't do anything right. We could see the bottom. And it wasn't a pretty sight

Wizards [Acclaim's first endemic title], and he would say, "No, I don't want it. You bring me a name I recognize and I'll buy your title." So we brought him *Rambo* and he put it in his release schedule. Now, *Rambo* was not as good a game as *Wizards* and *Wizards*, but that was the way he worked, and we had to deal with that.

NG: But other companies managed fine, releasing high-quality games based on innovation and gameplay [Electronic Arts managed OK...]

Greg: EA, I think in hindsight, had a better strategy. But EA is the only exception. The rest of us, for whatever reasons, went in a different direction. But to understand our position, I think you have to look at what we were trying to achieve and where Acclaim had come from.

In the beginning

NG: Please, explain

Greg: Acclaim is a little different from most of the other companies in the game industry because Acclaim didn't have any venture financing. Acclaim was financed solely by myself and Jimmy Scorsoppe [Acclaim's co-chairman of the board]. We'd both been in the videogame business previously. Jimmy more on the sales and marketing side, and myself from running the international group at Activision — kind of on the deal side. I knew everyone in the game business at that time, and so when we decided to start Acclaim, we already had a relationship with Nintendo and some other Japanese publishers, such as Square. And initially our business was based on licensing software from Japan to bring to the U.S.

NG: What kind of games did you release?

Greg: There were very few publishers at that time who were supporting Nintendo's 8-bit system, and the market was not very discriminate. Basically, there was not enough software to fill retail shelves. However, most publishers — in the U.S. and in Japan — were reluctant to come into the cartridge business because they all remembered the debacle of the Atari 2600, and no one wanted to go there again. But in Acclaim's first year, with less than 12 people, we did about \$40 million in business. The next year we did about \$70 million. And that really provided the capital for the further development of the company.

NG: And up to this point you weren't actually making games yourself? You were just buying games in one country and selling them in another?

Greg: Our focus was on marketing, sales, and distribution. What we wanted to do was take a property and maximize our revenues from it — exploit it as much as we could, all over the world.

NG: And you did this very well. At the height of *Mortal Kombat*'s popularity, Acclaim was the biggest third-party software publisher in the world. But in 1996, at the end of the 16-bit era, you ran into extreme financial difficulties. What led to these problems?

Greg: The industry changed. And we chose the wrong way to adapt. In 1995 to 1996, as the hardware systems changed from 16-bit to 32-bit, we chose a strategy of simply doing a lot more stuff. We would throw mud at the wall, hoping that some of it would stick until the market settled down again, and we could be more selective. But then the market said, "Enough is enough" — we don't want all that stuff. And we found ourselves in trouble.

NG: Why did the market say "enough is enough"?

Greg: Before 1995 there were a lot of videogame magazines that talked about games, but they had very little influence on which games sold well and which did not. In 1995 and in 1996, however, the specialist magazines and the Internet became much more influential in dictating taste, establishing products, and making products successful. Gamers became a whole lot better informed. You can now read reviews, previews, and pre-previews of games in development all over the world on a daily basis. Opinion-formers, both journalists and hobbyists, became the *Siskel* and *Ebers*, for want of a better word, of our industry.

And retail took notice. Before this time retail wouldn't recognize a *Turbo*, or indeed any other little-known game with great gameplay for that matter. In fact, retail didn't really pay attention to the quality of the game at all. But now there was a real buzz for them to tap into, and they started paying close attention.

NG: You're saying it got more difficult to sneak a bad game onto the market.

Greg: It got almost impossible. But they do still occasionally get there [laughs].

NG: And when the music stopped Acclaim was left holding the baby. So to speak?

Greg: Right, we had a lot of games that we couldn't sell at full price.

NG: How close did you come to going under?

Greg: In 1996 it seemed that we couldn't do anything right. We could see the bottom. And it wasn't a pretty sight. You wouldn't want to be there.

NG: It was *Batman Forever* that almost sunk the ship, right?

Greg: There were others, too. But yes, *Batman Forever* and

forever and forever [laughs].

But everything got sold eventually. Everything always has a price point. Whether it starts at \$50 and then drops to \$40 to \$30 to \$20 to \$10 to \$5 — everything sells eventually. I mean, nothing ended up getting buried. And if you remember back to 1995, Toys 'R Us had racks of games at hugely discounted prices — it wasn't just us.

NG: But despite all these problems, Acclaim didn't go under. You fought back and are here to tell the tale today.

Greg: We lost a lot of money. But we didn't let Acclaim go down the tubes. We fought tooth and nail in order to survive. There were a lot of sleepless nights, and there was a lot of hard work put in by a lot of people. It would have been easier just to let it fail, but we didn't let it do that. As a result we have a strong organization, and we have a lot going for us at the point in time.

NG: Do you regret the "old" Acclaim? In hindsight, do you think you made the wrong decisions?

Greg: I don't think that we chose wrong, necessarily. But we were late building a creative organization. In 1995 we bought Probe, Iguaña, and Sculptured, and set up the coin-op division — these are the investments that are paying off today and will help us survive tomorrow. Had we not done this, we would not be here today, sure. But then, on the other hand, had the "old" Acclaim not taken the steps that got us the capital to buy these development studios, then we wouldn't be here today either.

The "new" Acclaim

NG: That was then, this is now. In 1996, Acclaim is riding high on the success of its Nintendo 64 lineup and looks set to make a big impact with Forsaken and other new projects. How did you manage such a sharp turnaround?

Greg: We cut our release schedule by two-thirds. We are now spending anything between \$1.5 million and \$2.5 million to produce a title. We made the decision to release a lot fewer — but better — titles and embark on a real quest for excellence. And we are not afraid to kill our children — our games in development — if we find that they don't work.

NG: That's a great attitude. But how do you explain *Fantastic Four*?

Greg: Sometimes, like in the case of *Fantastic Four*, we have to continue with a project, whether we like it or not because we have a contractual obligation to do so. So there are some things that we do from time to time that don't appear to make any sense to anybody.

Also, you can't always make a 100% accurate decision as to whether or not you should out something or let it go. Our numbers aren't quite as big as the film numbers, but they're still pretty big. And if you were running a film studio in 1997 and *Titanic* was one of the titles on your release schedule, when development costs got to \$100 million, would you have said, "No, it's gotten too expensive, I'll never make back the money I need to put into this, I'm going to cut it," or would you allocate it the extra \$20 million needed to finish the job? In the case of *Titanic*, that extra \$20 million turned into an extra \$100 million, but the film was a big hit. In this instance the gamble paid off, but the point is that you can never be 100% sure and sometimes you have to live with your mistakes. If it works out, you're a hero. If not, you've got problems.

NG: In what other ways has Acclaim's approach to making games changed?

Greg: Product development was run by someone else back then. He had full autonomy to do what he wanted to do, and he was the one that was deciding which games were the good ones and which were the ones we would go with. He's no longer with the organization. Now we're focused and organized a little differently.

NG: You say your aim is to release "lower, better" games. But the development studios you've purchased — Sculptured, Probe, and Iguaña — were previously best known for churning out masses of B-grade games. In some ways, aren't you trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear?

Greg: Sure, a lot of people would say that they were just conversion houses. And now we're asking them to change, sure. We've told them that we want original, unique software. And we'll spend more money on it and put more people on different

projects. And, so far at least, they have risen to this challenge.

Big fish in a little pond?

NG: Let's talk about where Acclaim is today. Most third-party publishers have said, "We don't like the Nintendo 64 cartridge business. It's too risky and it's not profitable." Acclaim, however, has forged ahead and enjoyed tremendous success with *Turk* and *Quarterback Club*. So is it profitable? Do you know something the other companies don't?

Greg: I can tell you that the Nintendo 64 cartridge business can be very profitable. Certainly there are better profit margins in the Sony or PC markets, but we could not have achieved the same

Whether [a game] starts at \$50 and then drops to \$40 to \$30 to \$20 to \$10 to \$5 — everything sells eventually

kind of success in these other places that we have achieved with Nintendo.

NG: Why not?

Greg: In early 1996 we looked at the market and tried to see where Acclaim could fit in. PlayStation looked good, but the market was crowded and a lot of companies were making some very big investments. On Nintendo 64 it was a little more open. Besides, we just happened to own two or three development studios who really liked N64. They liked the technology and they'd figured out how to make games on it that looked different to everything else.

Also, as a company we'd made this decision to concentrate on fewer titles — which fits with Nintendo 64 — and we also had experience, both good and bad, with cartridges. Once burned twice shy, sure, but we've experienced enough to make sure that it's been profitable. Now having *Turk* as part of Nintendo's new \$39.99 line means that soon we're not going to have any *Turk* inventory left at all. And that's smart management. Other companies don't have the models or the experience to do this.

NG: Are you claiming that selling a Nintendo 64 cartridge at \$39.99 is profitable?

Greg: *Turk* does OK at this price. But the important thing is that Nintendo will be back on TV to support this with a \$4 million



talking

campaign. This keeps the Acclaim and Turko brands alive and fresh in the marketplace, which has to be a good thing

NG: Nintendo has recently made releasing games for N64 a whole lot more attractive to other third-party publishers. As more companies start developing Nintendo 64 games, can you maintain your profile and success?

Greg: Sure, it'll get more crowded. But I still think that in Turko and

I mean, we announce profitable results and nobody calls. But announce a big loss and I can't hide fast enough

Quarterback Club we have a couple of good brands that will provide the same kind of return that we've seen in the past. And, of course, more publishers are joining in because the market is growing. And this bodes well for our business.

NG: What's your PC strategy?

Greg: Our PC strategy is going to be very high-end and very focused. You'll see some of our sports brands appearing in the PC space, but you won't see too many releases. Probably just six or seven in the year.



NG: How about PlayStation?

Greg: As for PlayStation we are very happy about what happened with Riven. It really exceeded both our and retail's expectations, with nice, healthy reorders. I think PlayStation really is making the most of its older demographic.

NG: So are you pleased with where Acclaim is today?

Greg: What you see today is a result of the choices we made 18 months ago, and with titles like Turko, Quarterback Club, Forsaken, and then Shadow Man, yes—we're very pleased.

We recently told analysts that we might take a small loss this financial quarter because we chose not to release product that we felt wasn't done. I'm talking about Forsaken and Barman and Robin. Now, the old Acclaim may have pushed these projects into the marketplace and wouldn't have dreamed of saying to Wall Street, "We're sorry but we're not going to be profitable this quarter." So this is a new stance for us.

NG: And how is the Acclaim brand perceived today?

Greg: A lot better than it was yesterday [laughs]. And it's a matter of continuing to build it. Take Forsaken as an example of our PC strategy, and you can see that we're aiming at the top end of the market. We're taking this hard route and sticking with it. And if this limits our sales, then so be it—because we'll be defining ourselves as a premier label.

Retrospectively ...

NG: Do you feel that the videogame press has been fair to Acclaim over the years?

Greg: Over the years, in the long term? Yes. But on a day-to-day basis, have I felt that the press has been overcritical? Sure. During the time we were rebuilding, we were very quiet. And we suffered the slings and arrows of the press for what had gone before, and all we could offer in reply was, "Trust us! We're working on becoming a new company." And the people you see here today are the ones who didn't listen to the press saying, "They're never gonna make it" and instead knuckled down to the job at hand.

NG: When everything went wrong at the end of 16-bit, at any point did you consider abandoning the Acclaim brand altogether? It can't have held a warm place in the hearts of too many gamers ...

Greg: You may disagree with me, but I think there has always been a lot of equity in the brand itself, both at a consumer and retail level. We've used other brands in the past, but Acclaim is the one that sticks. Certainly it sticks within the financial community.

NG: You caught a lot of bad press when Mortal Kombat was accused of corrupting the nation's youth. Do you still hear from Senator Lieberman?

Greg: [Laughs]. The ICMA has done a great job in quelling the issues that were being raised by Senator Lieberman, and I think the industry has done a good job in pulling together and dealing with this. The big issues right now are facing the different content regulations from country to country, which forces us to develop individually from country to country. And this stands in the way of our progress of becoming a truly international business.

NG: Most other publishers are taking a similar "fewer games, higher quality" strategy. Do you think they might have learned a lesson from Acclaim's high-profile brush with disaster?

Greg: We set an example that everyone paid attention to, sure [smiles]. I mean, we announce profitable results and nobody calls. But announce a big loss and I can't hide fast enough.

NG: Is it your goal to recapture the market share Acclaim enjoyed at the height of the 16-bit boom?

Greg: You have to look at my background. I come from the music business, and in the music business there are five or six record companies that basically dominate the business and divide market share. I think that this model applies well to the game industry. You are the prey or the predator—that's just part of the natural evolution of an industry.

NG: And Acclaim will remain a predator?

Greg: We're getting stronger every day. And it will take us a couple of years, but I think we can make it back up to the top.

ng



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VM Labs' Project X: Development kits ship, demos run, and a new console competitor is born • **Microsoft:** At MeltDown, Microsoft asks developers to look two OS's ahead — to NT • **Videotopia:** The landmark videogame exhibit finally hits the big time in Washington, D.C. • **Once Upon Atari:** Howard Scott Warshaw's documentary reviewed

news

Breaking news broken best

Project X progresses

Kits for the first U.S.-designed console since Jaguar are in developers' hands. Plus, first impressions on the latest from VM Labs



Currently located in a cramped office behind a realtor in Los Altos, California, the company is moving to posher digs soon

More details have emerged on VM Labs' Project X. (Don't believe the hype on www.gameaddict.com — there is no final name for the system yet.) **Next Generation** has seen the development system, and it should please most developers, particularly those on a budget. Running at roughly one-third the price of the PlayStation kit, the system (known as OZ), housed in a PC box, is Ethernet-ready, so more than one development PC can attach to it via a standard LAN.

Next Generation saw some demos up and running on the system, including a surprising complete follow-up to *Tempest* 2000 by Jeff Minter. Minter, who also worked on the system's libraries (which bear, not surprisingly, names like *Llama* and *Carnell*), appears to have lost none of his flare for psychedelic effects, and the game, running in a fully interlaced mode, looked great. Also running was *Doom*. Compiled directly from the recently released source code with no modifications and allegedly using only one-seventh of one-fourth of the system's power, *Doom* ran, but not impressively. This was actually a demo of the capabilities of the system's compilers, though, and will not appear as a game. Also running were some standard bouncing ball/reflection/texture demos, which looked good,



One of the first demos any vendor worth its salt creates is one with lots of rotating objects. Here it's cubes with fully animated textures

although we are still uncertain as to the true power of the system. *Tempest*'s sequel looks good, but it's not exactly a demo that taxes a system's capabilities, and it's still not as impressive as the dinosaur demo that accompanied PlayStation's launch.

The company impressed many recent CES attendees and has been shipping better than a dozen dev kits a week since the show, with units in place in several U.S. locations, the U.K., and Belgium. By the time you read this, systems should be in place, and development under way in Singapore and Japan as well.

The company is still reluctant to reveal its business model, although, "It's an open system, but not at all like 3DO" is a fairly

succinct way of putting the company line. We expect details of the business model to appear around the CDGC time frame at the earliest and E3 at the latest. (Be sure to check **Next Generation Online** for the latest.)

Tellingly, though, the company is confident that it will have Project X systems in "millions" of homes by the end of 1999. Claiming those sorts of numbers indicates to us either that the executives at VM Labs are crazy or that they have a trick up their collective sleeves that will, to say the least, surprise Sony, Nintendo, and Sega. And the executives at VM Labs don't seem crazy to us. Between Project X and Katana, 1998 and 1999 are shaping up to be very exciting years in the console wars.

ng



This demo, running fully interlaced, looks pretty fantastic

Microsoft's Meltdown pushes NT

Ignore our consumer marketing and forget Win 98, MS tells developers

In the past, Windows NT has sat on the gaming sidelines, eschewed for performance and compatibility reasons. But at the most recent Microsoft Meltdown DirectX developers conference, the Redmond giant told hardware manufacturers and software developers to "start supporting NT, for it is the future of our operating system plans." And given the features that DirectX 6 promises down the road, as well as the move to embed DirectX 6 into Windows NT 5.0, it is looking more and more like the gaming OS that Microsoft will be pushing in 1999.

DirectX Project Manager Kevin Baccus acknowledged that NT currently isn't an acceptable gaming platform, citing a lack of hardware accelerator support and security violation issues. At the same time, Baccus took a jab at software developers who put in a simple OS check at runtime, a process that fails. "A lot of games would run just fine if developers

took some time to test them on NT."

Microsoft is hoping that Meltdown will spur widespread hardware and software support to battle the majority of current NT gamers' complaints. If the push is on for NT, the next question is, why even bother with Windows 98 (which will be shipping later this year)? The answer — NT isn't quite where it should be yet. In his presentation regarding the future of DirectX and Windows, Jim Allchin, Microsoft's senior vice-president of personal and business systems group, said, "[NT is] still more complicated than we would like to see. We're working on making the interfaces easier to use while increasing features and performance."

In the interim, Microsoft wants to see continued support for Windows 9x but needs to begin pushing developers to start working on NT support for its future products, especially in the hardware arenas (where support has been notably lacking). Said

Baccus: "It's sort of like a television cooking show. The key isn't getting all the ingredients together, mixing them, and making the meal. It's getting all the components of the meal to come out of the oven at the same time. That's where we're at right now."

The conference also stressed the need for developers to continue to use (or expand the use of) NT as a development environment, citing alleged improved performance and stability as major reasons for switching over. Another reason cited for using NT as a development environment was that DirectX 6 will be ready for testing first on NT.

So what are most gamers

What is it?

Atari had plans to release this game system in response to Super Nintendo but scrapped it in favor of a new, top-secret project.

DirectX 6 looks like the gaming OS Microsoft will be pushing

going to be using in 1998 (unless they want support for multiple processors)? Well, for now, still Windows 98. But by 1999, the expanded feature set and emerging hardware trends (specifically, more widespread multiprocessing, among others) in NT should make it the preferred choice, especially since Microsoft is intent on ramming NT down developer and hardware vendors' collective throats. Can Microsoft convince consumers to pony up for yet another OS upgrade before the end of the century? Time will tell, but the company certainly wants to make sure games are available for the OS at launch. After Meltdown, developers have that message now, loud and clear.



Microsoft has provided developers a reference rasterizer to offer a better understanding of how the DirectX3D graphic pipeline operates. This mill was generated by the reference rasterizer

Once Upon Atari:

The Agony and the Ecstasy

video review

A documentary that recounts the golden days of Atari

It is ...

The Atari Panther. It was rumored that the system would be compatible with Atari Lynx, but the marketing possibilities of a 64-bit system, Jaguar, overshadowed the already aging 16-bit technology.



Todd Frye (above) recounts the tale of programming games like *Pac-Man* and *Xevious* for Atari 2600 in the video *The Agony and the Ecstasy*

The culture at Atari's console division in the glory days of 1979-1982 has always had a mystique about it. It was the seminal videogame development "scene," and many myths and legends grew out of that time. During last June's Electronicon, a Philadelphia fan convention, Howard Scott Warshaw, creator of *E.T.* and *Vars Revenge*, premiered a new documentary, *Once Upon Atari: The Agony and the Ecstasy*. It is actually the final installment (and the one being released first) of a planned four-part series that explores those glory days by interviewing the programmers who created some of console gaming's best-loved (and most hated) titles.

While the video quality sometimes leaves a lot to be desired (the introduction is almost unbearably cheesy), the interviews are amazing. Warshaw has tracked down almost everyone who did anything of significance in Atari's home division, including the people involved in some of the most criticized events in Atari's history, like *Pac-Man* for Atari 2600 (see "What the Hell Happened?" page 38). The interviews are seamlessly edited together with very little narration, which is good if you are familiar with Atari's history — for those who don't already know most of these names, though, the video may be a bit confusing.

This episode tries to

capture the spirit of what it was like to actually work at Atari, an environment that came from being a product of the times — the free-wheeling '70s — and the need to hire anyone who could program the 2600, a feat that ranged from difficult to impossible. This quote from Todd (Pac-Man) Frye is typical: "They were having a problem getting a programmer to do the Atari 2600 *Xevious*. *Xevious* was a very graphically active game in the arcades, and the Atari 2600 was not really a very graphically active machine. So I went home, I smoked this joint with a little psilocybin and a little cocaine in it, and all of a sudden it sprang full forth in my mind exactly how to do it. And that was the moment of inspiration."

Other installments will feature Nolan Bushnell, Larry Kaplan (Activision, *Kaboom!*), Rob Fulop (Missile Command), and others, disclosing their personal feelings and stories about everything from the creation of Activision to some of the pretty outrageous sexual (mis)conduct that went on between employees. The remainder of the series will be released later this year. The first episode will cover what it was like to actually work at Atari, the second will deal with the legendary three M's of Atari (marketing, management, and money), and finally the third — and possibly the most exciting — will detail the game design process at Atari.

The in-depth nature of the documentary offers a refreshing contrast to other efforts, like Leonard Herman's *Phoenix* (see review **NG 37**), which, in their attempts to cover a broader subject matter, are necessarily more impersonal. Is this video essential viewing? If you're simply interested in the broad history of the industry, probably not. But if the word "Atari" still can make the hair on the back of your neck stand up, send in your money ASAP — you won't be disappointed.



Available in NTSC or PAL. Running time: 28 minutes.

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More information can be found at <http://www.netcom.com/~hsw>.

Ultima Addition

Due to a printer's error, we failed to credit Robert Gregg for his help on *Next Generation's Ultima* time line (**NG 39**). Gregg's definitive *Ultima* fan site can be found at <http://www.scott.net/~rgregg/ultima/>. We regret the error.



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Datastream

Facts and figures taken from the last available top 20 TRSIS report. Average price of top 20 game: \$45.45. Number of officially licensed sports games: 6. Platform breakdown of top 20 games: Nintendo 64-9 (45%); PlayStation-10 (50%); Game Boy-1 (5%). Percentage of titles in the top 20 that are sequels: 75%. Number of Nintendo titles in the top 5: 4. Number of top 20 titles under \$10: 1. *Jumpack Volume 2* for PlayStation. Total number of racing games in the top 20: 6. Percentage of titles starring Mario: 15%. Total number of RPGs in the top 20: 1. *Final Fantasy VII*.

breaking

Arcade exhibit opens in National Press Building

Videogames are preserved for future generations

Videotopia, a traveling exhibit detailing the history of videogames, went on display in the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., at the end of January.

The exhibit includes 85 working videogames as well as interactive kiosks that provide information about the people and events that shaped the videogame industry. Visitors are allowed to play the games while they view the exhibit and can even earn free game tokens by answering historical questions that are programmed into the kiosks.

Games on display include such historically important titles as *Computer Space* and *Pong*, as well as popular hits like *Pac-Man*, *Robotron 2084*, and *Star Wars*. The games in the exhibit are part of a 400-game collection that includes

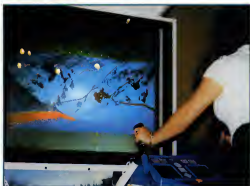


The exhibit chronicles the evolution of videogames, from *Battlezone* to *Indy 500*.

everything from Exidy's *Death Race '98* to Cinematronic's *Warrior*.

According to Videotopia founder Keith Feinstein, the exhibit will remain on display in the National Press Building until April 15. It is scheduled to appear next in the Maryland Science Center from May 29 through September 6, 1999. According to Feinstein, several museums have expressed interest in booking the exhibit in the future. Videotopia is one of an increasing number of efforts to document the early days of the videogame industry. Another is Howard Scott Warshaw's new video series, *Once Upon Atari*, reviewed on page 20.

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Home versions of these popular games lack the cabinet art and characteristic controls that are important to the arcade experience

Well, what'll it be?



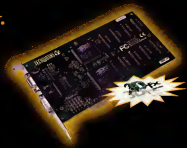
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Images above are actual screenshots from F/A-18 Hornet 3.0 Korea.

In the

Studio

Gaming news from the mouths of game makers

When Pulse and 7th Level merged to form a new Internet tools company called *P7 Solutions*, the game development teams at Pulse split post-haste. The *Space Bunnies Must Die* team is now working under the name *Jinx* and will remain with publisher



Ripcord Games. (See the *Space Bunnies* preview on page 74.) Another new spin-off, *Eight Cylinder Studios*, remains hard at work on the tentatively titled *Flux*, a 3D action/platform game, which according one employee, will be the first game to offer "varying planes of gravity." As of

press time, *Eight Cylinder* had not announced a new publisher for *Flux* but was courting several larger, unnamed companies with strong distribution channels.

The original *Sin* has yet to hit stores, but word from inside

Dallas-based *Ritual* is that a sequel to the anticipated first-person shooter is already in the works.

Sin will be available from Activision in late spring.

Boss Games keeps movin' and groovin' on Nintendo 64. The company is putting the wraps on its *Twisted Edge* Snowboarding and has another N64 racing game entering development. Hesitant

to say much about the next game, *Boss* VP of Development Colin Gordon explains, "It will not be a sequel to *Top Gear Rally*... but will complement that property."

Although Electronic Arts refused to comment on the project, the company is bringing its *Need for Speed* franchise to Nintendo 64. *Paradigm Entertainment*, the company already responsible for two Nintendo 64 titles (Nintendo's *PilotWings* and Video System's *Aerofighters Assault*), is developing the game for EA.

At least four Capcom Nintendo 64 titles are currently in development, and the first should hit Japanese stores as early as March 1998. At least one of the

titles will be a *Mega Man* game, which will be called *Rock Man Dash* in Japan. The other games will come out later in 1998 and the following year.



Cribsheet

Stuff every gamer should know. This month, Microvision — the first nondedicated, handheld game system

No. 15

Milton Bradley's Microvision

What Is Microvision?

Microvision was a handheld game system introduced by Milton Bradley in 1979. It was designed by Jay Smith, who would later design Vectrex — the only home vector console. It had the first successful LCD display and an amazingly low 16x16 pixel resolution, and it ran on a nine-volt battery. Whom did it compete against? Coleco and Mattel, mostly. They had been having successful years due

mainly to their handheld games. Milton Bradley saw this, and instead of making a dedicated handheld game, it looked to Atari's 2600 for inspiration. Microvision was the first handheld with interchangeable cartridges. Each cartridge was roughly three-quarters the length of the 10-inch long system and could facilitate membrane control buttons, enabling games to have their own controls, independent of the

console. It seemed like a match made in heaven. Seemed like? Well, the idea was great, and the initial release was quite successful, but if there was a lesson to be learned, it was that a good game system doesn't mean much if you don't have games. There was a library of only eight games at launch, including *Block Buster*, which came with the system, and Milton Bradley released only

four more games in the following two years. Then what happened? By this time, the low resolution and limited control had hindered the Microvision's continued success. The system and its games would eventually turn up at discount outlets. It left its mark, however, as a revolutionary step in handheld gaming and can arguably be considered the forefather of the Nintendo Game Boy.



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Movers and Shakers

The business news that affects the games you play

Silence and secrets at Sony
Sony is at the height of its power. It has barely taken a wrong step. From the great pioneers who charmed their way into this industry through to the plodding burghers and gray administrators who consolidated that early success and who've been gathering our gameplay taxes ever since, everything has proceeded exactly as Sony's emperors foresaw.

Sony's problem now is how to handle the great transition to a new platform. No company

The man at Sony has one task when it comes to PlayStation 2, and that is to say nothing. In a recent Sony interview in **NG 37**, I couldn't shake the impression that the interviewee (Phil Harrison) was much more interested in displaying his ability to stonewall than in telling us anything of use or interest. For me, reading this was a pointless and depressing exercise. It must have been much worse for the interviewer, who gallantly tried every trick in the book.

Harrison is not to be castigated for fulfilling

by **Colin Campbell**

Colin Campbell is
Next Generation's
International
Correspondent



The relationship between third parties and Sony is always going to be strained. The former are not so much allies, as vassals

has ever succeeded in this task, and the dead or diminished empires that preceded Sony were (in most cases) no fools.

Sony's position at present is both enviable and awkward. Such is its dominance and importance that it can afford to be, shall we say, just a tiny little bit arrogant. There are plenty of third parties who, given a few drinks, will complain that the company is high-handed in attitude and tight-lipped with information. But then, there are no third parties stupid enough to make such a statement on the record to the press. And then again, these are the standard complaints third parties make of inflated hardware corporations.

Sony is not the first manufacturer to feel the glorious sense of its own importance. Sega was just as intolerable a few years ago but (and I'm allowing myself a twinge of satisfaction here) doesn't seem quite so proud now. Nintendo has survived two platform jumps, but given the lead it held with NES in the 1980s, it does rather appear that each technology improvement has cost it in market share.

The relationship between third parties and Sony is always going to be strained. The former are not so much allies, as vassals. Third parties are not only frustrated by day-to-day inconveniences (calls not being returned, late technology updates, etc.), but also by Sony's refusal to form a trusting relationship when it comes to PlayStation 2. The bottom line is that while Sony and the third parties need each other, they are still chasing the same dollars.

his dread function. Sony is successful exactly because it always acts in its own interest, and because it manages its own image and information with the fanatical zeal of a true believer. If Sony wanted execs running around telling the press stuff, it wouldn't spend so much money on publicists who run around

If Sony wanted execs running around telling the press stuff, it wouldn't spend so much money on publicists who run around telling the press nothing

telling the press nothing.

Sony executives understand that giving away details of PlayStation 2 gives competitors an advantage, but worse than that, it gives third parties an advantage. What better chip to hold in negotiations with large and powerful software publishers than the secret details that will unlock their future financial success?

The time will come when PlayStation's life will be on the wane, a time that Sony will seek to delay for as long as possible. (Few of you reading this believe Sony's task in life is to bring the best possible hardware to market as quickly as possible.)

When this happens, Sony will be vulnerable for the first time. Once its secrets are, by necessity, released, it will need to go on a new launch charm offensive once more. And since charm is rarely effortless (especially in Sony's case), that day needs to be managed carefully.

Thus, the infuriating but necessary silence.

The magazine that breaks details of the machine before the allotted time can expect nothing less than all of Sony's manic indignation and righteous anger and incandescent fury. I hope and pray it's us.

The dangers of new technology

VM Labs has been showing select journalists demos of Project X (see page 18). So several weeks ago, I bade farewell to my colleague, **NG Online** Editor Christian Svensson (known to us as Sven), on his way to the VM Labs offices. Before he left, I warned him of the mortal dangers inherent in looking at new bits

of gaming technology too closely.


My advice was not heeded. Sven came back with a disturbing and unnatural glow in his eyes. He had a beatific smile. He was babbling incomprehensibly about how his "mind is melting." All this after seeing a few multicolored pyramids jiggling on a screen? All this as a result of hearing about the business plan rumored to be the greatest wheeze since the molasses trade?

Hardware manufacturers should stop showing Sven this stuff. It turns his mind wrong. Sven, after all, is the last man in America who thinks the Jaguar is "awesome."

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Joyriding

Gaming on the Internet

Kesmai fights back

The online gaming market is still in its fledgling stages. I don't think that any one of the major players in the online gaming services would deny this, especially given that not a single one of them is turning a profit. Each of those companies is hanging on for that future point in time when the consumers have caught up to the revenue projections (which are, of course, astronomical). But in the interim, casualties are inevitable and the first major services are already undergoing massive

games, which don't require CD-ROMs," says Holden. "These are really two different markets, but they are still competing for mindshare. At this stage in the industry, it's really important to pull together because the industry is so small and has so far to go before it really establishes itself."

GameStorm is adopting a monthly subscriber model in which \$10 a month gets players full access to all of Engage's, Kesmai's, and Heat's services. Each service can readily be accessed via a web interface

by **Christian Svensson**

Christian Svensson is the editor of *Next Generation Online*



Kesmai is determined to find strength in numbers in its latest endeavor

downsizing and even consolidations within other services. One recent example of this is the formation of Kesmai's GameStorm.

Kesmai originally had great success by capitalizing on the captive audience of AOL. Life was great for Kesmai until about nine months ago. At this time, AOL formed a subsidiary, WorldPlay, which was given promotional control of AOL's Games channel. According to Kesmai, the move drastically changed the level of competition for that lucrative AOL market. Immediately following the change, Kesmai experienced a nearly 90% drop-off in revenue, forcing it to retaliate in two ways. First, the company filed a 13-point lawsuit against AOL, WorldPlay, and several of their executives (which will be going to trial this month). Then, Kesmai decided to try to go its own and attempt to harvest the gaming population of the internet as opposed to its prior AOL audience. Obviously doing this is far more costly, risky, and difficult than placating the masses of AOL's membership.

But Kesmai is determined to find strength in numbers in its latest endeavor. The company's president, Chris Holden, knew that other service providers were looking for an edge, and the thought of a joint venture struck him. The embattled Engage was the first to sign on to the joint venture that was later named GameStorm. The other major partner? SegaSoft's Heat. "We wanted to join forces to build the most complete gaming destination that's ever been devised. If you look at the industry, you see players like MPeth, TEN, and Heat that are focusing on CD-ROM matchmaking and fast action. And then you see companies like Engage, Kesmai, and WorldPlay, who are really focusing on massively multiplayer, immersive



people would have a monthly flat fee, so most customers we had rolled right over to become GameStorm customers," says Holden. Currently Kesmai is still running on AOL due to an existing contract. "We still have a contract with AOL that we are fulfilling our obligations in. We're trying to make them fulfill their obligations. Without going into too much detail of what they are and are not doing, we still have more games on AOL than anyone, including WorldPlay. The problem is they are buried under WorldPlay's brand, and the control has been given over to WorldPlay," says Holden.

On the content front, Kesmai has traditionally created much of its own. Specific examples include the *Air Warrior* series, but most recently, *Aliens Online* has become one of the biggest hits. "Aliens is the first time you've seen a massively multiplayer online-only game that starts to approach the quality of CD-ROM titles in terms of speed, quality, and 'twitichy' action," says Holden. Hundreds of people organized into teams compete in *Aliens Online* in a persistent universe, and all of this for only an 8MB download. While this isn't *Ultima Online*, 8MB is certainly far more accessible than the retail-only distribution Origin needed with its more than 250MB installation. Finally, a new version of *Air Warrior 3D* will be released in conjunction with a retail component aimed at bringing in

Whichever company has the deepest pockets is going to last the longest

at GameStorm's web site

(www.gamestorm.com), which will boast fairly transparent shifting between the services. In the case of Engage's and Kesmai's content, each will launch identically. Heat will have a separate button that will launch Heat's Katalyst interface, where its RIXX technology (which is an IPX tunneling technology based upon Kahn) is expected to be well-exploited.

"Our previous customers were paying an hourly rate, and obviously the vast majority of

new customers for the service.

The future of GameStorm, like all online services, is always in question, but given its collection of content, business model, and partners, it seems to have fairly decent backing. But at this point in the game, whichever company has the deepest pockets is going to last the longest and reach that finish line. Time will tell whether or not GameStorm is a sprinter or a marathoner in this race.

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The latest arcade and coin-op news

Will new \$1 coins impact gameplay prices?

Thanks to Uncle Sam, dollar coins with a brand new design will definitely enter into circulation in far greater numbers than ever seen in our lifetimes. As a result, gamers may eventually find more games priced at \$1 per play. But all this is still at least a couple of years in the future. And no matter how widespread the circulation of new dollar coins becomes, other factors could hold down play prices in most arcades anyway.

Here's the scoop: Government stocks of old Susan B. Anthony dollar coins are running low, thanks to heavy use by U.S. post offices, city bus lines, and the like. Trouble is, nobody really likes the "Suzies" design, which is easily confused with a quarter. Result: On December 1, 1997, President Clinton signed legislation that contained the "U.S. One Dollar Coin Act of 1997." This law requires the Mint to have new-design dollar coins ready when the Treasury runs out of Suzies around the middle of the year 2000. The new designs will be gold-colored, so you won't mistake them for a quarter.

Contrary to what some may think, the economy's growing reliance on dollar coins is not inflationary. It is a very slow "catch-up" reaction to the inflation of the past few decades. Today's dollar bill has the same purchasing power a quarter did in the 1960s — or less. The 12¢ comic book of 1965, for example, now costs \$1.50 and up. About the only items you can still purchase today at their original 20¢ to 25¢ prices of the 1970s are newspapers (which are subsidized by advertising) and phone calls (in a shrinking number of markets ... and those are often subsidized by long distance charges). America is perhaps the last major industrialized country whose basic unit of currency is traded in paper, not coins, and where video gameplay prices are routinely under 75¢.

Despite all this, gamers may find that wider use of dollar coins has little impact on play pricing. First, the U.S. arcade market is highly competitive, not just between arcades but also against other forms of entertainment. Arcade owners know that many players are keenly price-sensitive, so they often compete for your business by slashing gameplay prices to rock-bottom levels. That's also why we're seeing more innovations like nickel arcades; one-time entry fees for certain periods (with all games set on free play); and "happy hour" type discount

pricing on gameplay.

More likely to impact gameplay prices are the future use of arcade Internet connections and the growing use of dedicated "smart cards" and arcade membership incentives. Like the savvy casino owners in Las Vegas, arcade managers would like their computers to keep track of exactly who plays which games for how long, how much you spend, etc.

Sega: Bigger is better ... maybe

Sega can't quite seem to make up its mind about how to handle the U.S. market. The company's Japanese chairman, Mr. Nakayama, has in the past lectured American arcades to the effect that "small games earn small money." Likewise, Sega has tried to show America how the arcade business "should" be run by launching its own chain of lavish LBE sites, called GameWorks. Expensive Sega masterpieces like *Top Skater* do

Sega has tried to show America how the arcade business "should" be run

sell briskly to the better U.S. arcades. So, bigger is always better ... and small is definitely not beautiful, right?

Maybe, maybe not. Despite Sega's best efforts at persuasion, the typical mom-and-pop American game retailer remains stubbornly resistant to paying \$10,000 to \$20,000 for a one-player simulator. Perhaps that's why Al Stone, Sega GameWorks' coin-op president, is now on record saying that, along with its traditional high-end products, the factory will also bring out "lower-end" (i.e., cheaper) games in 1998, aimed directly at the small retailer. Gamers may see Sega producing games like the ones in Namco's popular Tekken series, which offer an advanced hardware platform at relatively low expense. We have no doubt that if Sega makes a serious effort to service this "smaller" end of the market, it can succeed "big time!"

LBE explosion continues

Dave & Buster's, king of the Location Based Entertainment trend, showed third-quarter net income up 8% over that period last year to \$1.5 million. Gross revenues for the quarter (which ended November 2) rose 6% to \$30.8 million, due to two new U.S. stores and improved performance at existing sites. D&B opened its Denver store in December, by the way, and plans four new stores for 1998 — including one each in Michigan and New York, plus two more in California.

by Marcus Webb

Marcus Webb is the editor of RePlay magazine.



More LBE news comes from Disney Regional Entertainment. The company has renamed its sports-themed restaurant/bar/arcade concept "ESPN Zone," and as Arcade readers know, the flagship site is up and running in Disney's Orlando, Florida, complex. Next units are set to debut in Baltimore's Inner Harbor this summer, followed by Chicago's North River in spring of 1999. Rollout to other major U.S. cities comes in the following months. By the way, Disney's second kiddie game center, Club Disney, opened this past January in West Covina, California, a Los Angeles suburb.

Lazer-Tron updates Prize Zone

The busy funmeisters at Lazer-Tron (Pleasanton, California) have released 2.0 software for Prize Zone, their innovative video skill game for your local arcade's prize-redemption section. New video gameplay choices on the menu include bowling, a maze game, a skill stop game, a skill "drop" game, and a two-player, card-type game. All games feature progressive bonuses and the factory's patented Insta-Prize system, which allows players to win large prizes such as a T-shirt or color TV in a single game. By the way, Lazer-Tron has also set up a prize fulfillment system for arcades. This system lets players view prizes on the factory's web site (www.lazertron.com) and pay for them with mail-in coupons, which are printed by the game on location.

Capcom taps PlayStation

Capcom has tapped the PlayStation platform for development of its latest arcade game, *Rival Schools*. It's a two-player fighting game squarely in Capcom's thematic tradition, featuring all new characters in a school playground setting. Multiple storylines and endings are promised. The Sony hardware lets Capcom offer 3D graphics for brand new moves, including the "3D chain combo" and the "burning vigor attack."

REMEMBER HOW THEY SAID:

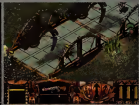
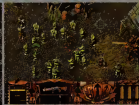
TECHNOLOGY WOULD TAKE WARFARE
OUT OF THE TRENCHES?



†HEY WERE WRONG.

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TERRA VICTUS



Retroview

Anecdotes from computer and videogaming's past

The rise and fall of arcades (part 2)

The videogame industry rolled into the early '80s like an unstoppable juggernaut. Namco released Pac-Man in 1980, and the next year saw such classics as Donkey Kong and Tempest. Arcades had become as common as convenience stores, and enormous superarcades were springing up around the country. The end, however, was already near. In a 1982 speech, President Ronald Reagan justified a request for \$600 million in aid to the Nicaraguan Contras by stating that he wanted less than one-tenth of what Americans would spend that year on coin-operated videogames. Unfortunately, he was wrong. President Reagan's numbers were based on coin-op receipts from 1981 that totaled \$5 billion, yet by mid-1982, the arcade business already started showing signs of distress, and coin-op revenues did not even come close to Reagan's predictions.

The first casualties were the largest and smallest people in the industry. Several of the largest superarcades failed. They still got more business than their competitors, but with lots of space in prime locations, the superarcades had enormous real estate expenses and needed hundreds and sometimes even thousands of customers per day.

Some arcade owners threw good money after bad by buying the latest and hottest games to bring back the crowds. The hottest game at the time was Dragon's Lair, the first and only



Despite Donkey Kong and Tempest, arcade earnings in the early '80s began to plummet

successful laser disc game. Cinematronics sold more than 16,000 Dragon's Lair cabinets at a cost of nearly \$4,500 each.

Most arcade operators believed that their machines should earn between four and six times their purchasing price to pay for themselves. At a quarter per game, really hot games only brought in \$300 per week during their peak, meaning that

At a quarter per game, really hot games only brought in \$300 per week during their peak

in the best case scenario, it would take a Dragon's Lair machine a full year of uninterrupted use to pay for itself. To hedge their bets, arcade owners charged 50¢ for the game. (And one thing Dragon's Lair never did was provide a year of uninterrupted use — the game's laser disc technology needed constant maintenance.)

While the disappearance of the

by Steven Kent

A frequent contributor to *Next Generation*, Steven Kent is the author of a forthcoming book on the history of videogames.



superarcades meant a brief reprieve for medium-sized arcades, it did nothing for the people who only had one or two machines. Because of the arcade business' amazing growth, many speculators placed games in ridiculous locations.

A lot of individual citizens were coming into this industry with hard-earned savings and buying machines and putting them in places that they shouldn't have gone. Lobbies of

Chinese restaurants, for example. You're just not going to make money on a machine in the lobby of a Chinese restaurant. When the bloom came off the rose, those machines came out of those locations.

— Eddie Adlum, publisher, *RePlay* magazine

The speculators who invested in games were not the only ones hurt by this shake-up. Game distributors had extended credit to many of these newcomers, only to have them default on their loans.

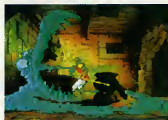
Unfortunately, a lot of distributors had extended too much credit to these newcomer operators, and they ended up with a lot of debt. A million dollars in unpaid bills was not unusual for a single distributorship.

Those who devoted much of their money to videogames ended up with a lot of unnecessary cabinetry and hardware and monitors and games that just had absolutely no resale value whatsoever, so they started visiting the city dump and pushing them over the hill.

— Eddie Adlum

Despite a few bright spots in recent history, the arcade industry has never rebounded. While it's true that *Cruis'n USA* surpassed *Defender* as Williams' all-time best-seller, and Capcom's *Street Fighter 2* gave the industry an adrenaline boost, no recent game has even come close to tying Pac-Man's 300,000 units sold mark.

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Thanks to the expensive price tag on the Dragon's Lair hardware, arcade owners were driven to raise the price of gameplay from a quarter to 50¢, and even then they barely recovered costs

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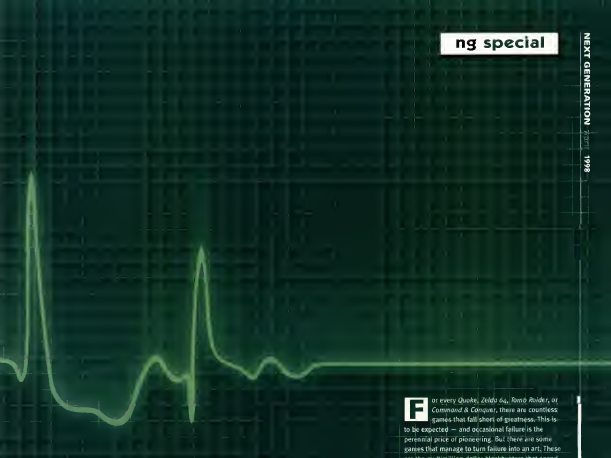


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**What
the hell
happened?**



Videogame failures are commonplace. But occasionally, a game seems to go out of its way to steal defeat from the jaws of victory. Sometimes, one will even drag an entire company down with it. These are the game industry's biggest failures. A **Next Generation** report...

For every *Quake*, *Zelda 64*, *Roméo Alder*, or *Command & Conquer*, there are countless games that fall short of greatness. This is to be expected — and occasional failure is the perennial price of pioneering. But there are some games that manage to turn failure into an art. These are the multimillion-dollar blockbusters that spend years in production, only to flop when they finally reach an apathetic audience. These are the make-or-break games companies need to stay afloat, which become part of the dead weight dragging them down. These are the hyped-up, marketing-driven behemoths, promising the moon to a slavering audience, only to deliver some of what was promised. These are the game industry's biggest flops — and **Next Generation** salutes them.

In compiling this feature, our aim is to shake a few skeletons out of the closet and move on. The game industry is still young and malleable, and it needs to learn from its mistakes. Although each of the following stories is unique and the product of individual circumstance, you'll find several common threads and recurring themes: The lure and promise of new technology, believing one's own hype, forgetting the foundations upon which past success has been built — these are the common mistakes that crop up again and again. What you won't find here are profiles of games that seemed destined for failure from the beginning — the FMV-based sports games, or licensed properties that involved lots of running from left to right. For example, whether they failed miserably or succeeded improbably, everyone always knew they sucked.

While gathering the eyewitness testimony from those involved in these games, some companies responded to our requests for help with more honesty and candor than others. It is **Next Generation's** belief that it takes guts to admit failure, and we look to the companies who show this kind of strength to lead us forward.

ng special



Rise of the Robots

Format: PC, Amiga, Super NES, Genesis

Publisher: Acclaim

Developer: Mirage/Instinct Design

Date of project start: July 1992

Date of project completion: December 1994

Bottom Line:

With an industry clamoring for "rendered" graphics, that's exactly what Mirage delivered: rendered graphics, and nothing but rendered graphics.

What was meant to happen:

There is always a handful of games that become lightning rods for the excitement surrounding the introduction of new technology to the gaming field. Following the introduction of CD-ROMs, for example, Payton's *Microcosm* and Rocket Science's *LodeStar: The Legend of Tully Bodine* were offered as games that would surely show us the way forward. And when, in the summer of 1993, "rendered graphics" became the industry's latest technological infatuation, all eyes turned to Mirage's *Rise of the Robots*.

"Lies. Damn lies and statistics. This is what journalists were fed during the production of *Rise of the Robots*"

Steve Jarratt, then-editor, Edge magazine

The game was being developed by Instinct Design, Mirage's in-house, U.K.-based development team, and early screenshots featured high-resolution, "rendered" images of sexy-looking robots, posed in a variety of fighting stances. They looked so good that when Instinct Design bragged of eclipsing Capcom's *Street Fighter 2* in terms of enemy AI and setting a new high watermark for the fighting game genre, people wanted to believe. *Rise of the Robots* quickly became the most talked about game, and the hype continued to spiral upward as the game's release approached.

What actually happened:

Most gamers now know not to trust packaging graphics, but this was a lesson that had to be learned the hard way. In hindsight it's obvious that nothing could look that good (and *Rise of the Robots* certainly looked really good) and simultaneously offer great gameplay — a computer can only process so much information, and if it spends 99% of its time on the graphics, then, inevitably, the gameplay has to suffer. But back in 1994, no one was aware that such high-resolution "rendered graphics" came with such a price tag, and no one was expecting the game to fail.

But boy, did it fail. Instinct Design had claimed that the game would feature 500 frames of animation per robot, with a special key frame system to ensure fluidity of movement. How this metamorphosed into the three frames of movement (robot punching/robot kicking/robot doing bigger all) featured in the final game is something of a mystery. What made the problem worse was Mirage's policy of porting the game to 13 platforms (including Game Boy, GameGear, Jaguar, and Sega's Master System),

most of which were far too underpowered to show off the game's one redeeming feature — its graphics. There was even a Commodore CD32 version developed, which sold, so Mirage claims, to more than 45% of the people who owned the ill-fated system. It seems that some people just can't catch a break.

"It's insulting to hear it being regarded as a *Street Fighter* clone," stated Mirage's woefully misinformed PR lady, prior to the game's release. "This isn't just a *Street Fighter*. It has gameplay that has never been seen before and graphics that have never been seen

got out of hand. It meant that the game could never live up to people's expectations. And, unfortunately, too many people inside the company started to believe it. And this, I think, affected the eventual outcome."

— A source close to the development team

"We gipped Donkey Kong Country to the post as the first game to feature playable rendered graphics. The press got hold of this idea and it ran away with itself. The hype was amazing, and I think people expected the game to be much more than it ever could be. But I stand by it, and although the reviews for the console versions were bloody appalling, the PC reviews were very positive. And I know that the gamers liked it because we had a lot of in-box registration cards returned that said very positive things. The lesson here is that console and PC gamers are two very different people."

"To criticize something is easy. To praise something is very difficult. You must look at *Rise of the Robots* in context. At the time, there wasn't a PC market, there was no CD-ROM market, it was all new. I think *Rise of the Robots* has to be seen as a product of its time."

— Peter Jones, managing director, Mirage

before — it's the next generation." Oh, how horribly, horribly wrong she was.

Eyewitness testimony:

"We really believed that we could deliver something special. And, of course, people at Mirage promoted the game as much as they could — it was their job to try and start a fire. But towards the end, the hype really



Rise of the Robots originally was to feature 100 frames of animation per robot. It ended up featuring three

"Lies. Damn lies and statistics. This is what journalists were fed during the production of *Rise of the Robots* by codeshop Instinct Design. Whether the team believed what they were saying at the time is arguable; that they singularly failed to deliver on all counts, isn't."

"It's weird that the game had an experienced lead coder and a complete novice creating the robot graphics. The 3D Studio renders, at least, did look convincing, but the 'gameplay' was a dog of Saint Bernard proportions. A colleague of mine almost completed the Amiga version simply by pushing up/right and holding down the fire button. So much for Instinct Design's promises of 'robots that fight... with a very high level of Artificial Intelligence.' Let's face it, the robots were as thick as shit. Ironically, the coder responsible for overseeing the robot's moves was himself a 'martial arts expert.' Though if he fights like *Rise of the Robots* I could take him, easy. With one hand tied behind my back."

"Also, they were always touting *Rise of the Robots* as a *Street Fighter* 2-better. Now, I always pondered, would they do that using the joystick/single-fire button configuration of the PC and Amiga? The answer was, of course, that they couldn't. And they didn't do it in the sequel either, which was only slightly, marginally better. In much the same way that some bits of the Titanic are slightly, marginally less under water than others."

— Steve Jarratt, then-editor of Edge, given the word's first, exclusive, "behind the scenes" look at *Rise of the Robots*



Pac-Man

Format: Atari 2600

Publisher: Atari

Developer: Atari

Date of project start: Late 1981

Date of project completion: April 1982

Bottom Line:

This game didn't lose Atari money in the end, but it did burst the bubble of faith 2600 gamers had in the company. E.T., released several months later, suffered the consequences.

What was meant to happen:

Atari had acquired the U.S. rights to produce a 2600 version of *Pac-Man* almost by accident (in the late 1970s, upon returning to California from Japan with a \$1 million deal to produce home versions of all of Namco's coin-op titles — quite possibly the videogame deal of the decade — Atari's licensing representative was fired for incompetence). In 1982, with "Pacmania" sweeping the world, Atari was in the perfect position to cash in. It had 30 million 2600 gamers hungry for new software, *Pac-Man* was the hottest coin-op since *Space Invaders*, and the game's success hinged on a novel concept, not fancy graphics, so it could easily be converted to the primitive home system. It was a no brainer, a slam dunk, a guaranteed home run.

How could it possibly go wrong?

What actually happened:

Even though more than 20 million 2600s had been sold in the U.S., Atari was aware that only 30 million consoles were still in active use (having launched in 1976, the 2600's golden years were already past). But this didn't stop Atari from manufacturing 12 million *Pac-Man* cartridges. The theory was that *Pac-Man* would not only sell to each and every 2600 active user but also prompt another two million people to go out and buy a console. Sales approaching \$500 million were assumed to be a "worst case scenario."

Apparently, the company was so busy gleefully doing the math that at no point did it pay attention to the actual business of making the game. The end result was the single worst coin-op conversion of all time, and Atari once again managed to steal defeat from the jaws of victory. Despite quickly matching up sales of seven million cartridges, gamers soon realized that 2600 *Pac-Man* was a clunker and stopped buying it.

What made the situation much worse was that this was back in the day when the vast majority of videogame sales were handled by JC Penney and Sears, family-oriented stores with a far more shopper-friendly return policy than the specialist software outlets of today. Atari never actually revealed how many of the seven million *Pac-Man* cartridges sold were returned for a full refund, but you can be sure that few gamers were backward in coming forward, especially with "it completely sucked" as a legitimate reason for demanding their money back.

Eyewitness testimony:

"[The *Pac-Man* team] did a lousy job. The story I heard was that marketing came in and said, 'We want this in six weeks!' And the programmer said, 'OK, I'll burn the midnight oil.' [The end result] was terrible."

— Ed Logg, then-Atari's head game designer

"I took a look at this bullshit game and told Ray [Kassar, then-president of Atari] that no one's going

to want to play it. But he didn't listen to me."

— Frank Ballouz, then-marketing manager of Atari coin-op

"A while after *Pac-Man* was released, Ms. *Pac-Man* was developed with an 8K ROM by a three-man team in six months. The first *Pac-Man* was developed with a 4K ROM by just one man in five months. This 4K ROM was the big problem. My version also included a two-player mode and this drastically ate into what little ROM there

"I remember handing over hard-saved birthday money for this one as a kid"

Neil West, former editor-in-chief, Next Generation



was. After the release of the game, Atari set a new rule that every game needed to have an 8K ROM.

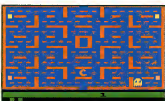
"Why wasn't the project allocated better resources? At the time the project was started, 8K ROMs weren't available yet. Also, when we started doing the port, *Pac-Man* wasn't a particularly big game. '*Pac-Man* fever' hit between the start and the finish of the project."

"I have no particular technical regrets when it comes to *Pac-Man*. I made the best decisions based on the technology available at the time. But six months later, would I have done it differently? Sure."

— Todd Frye, programmer of Atari 2600 *Pac-Man*

"I remember handing over hard-saved birthday money for this one as a kid. And yes, the quality of the game I received and later, the lack of faith *Next Generation* had in Atari while I was editor-in-chief, are undoubtedly connected."

— Neil West, former editor-in-chief, *Next Generation*



Pac-Man for the 2600 was supposed to be a sure thing, with expected sales of at least \$500 million. Instead, stores ended up refunding lots of money to unhappy gamers. But having developed the game in five months with one programmer, what could the company expect?

ng special



Madden '96

Format: PlayStation

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Developer: Electronic Arts/Visual Concepts

Date of project start: February 1995

Date of project completion: never released

Bottom Line:

A "disaster." This one not only cost EA the price of developing a game that never shipped, but also surrendered highly valuable market share to Sony's *GameDay*.

What was meant to happen:

In the fall of 1995, Madden '96 for PlayStation had a lot riding on its shoulders. To gamers, it was to be the "next generation" of videogame football. To the game industry, it would not only be proof whether or not mindshare secured in one generation of videogame hardware led to success in another, but it would also be a line in the 30-bit sand from the heavyweight third-party publisher. To Sony, it would be a response to its

mighty EA! This was John Madden football! There was no way they could screw it up. But we should have realized that the perpetual delays in getting to see a playable demo was an indication that something was wrong. And EA's strategy of simply taking an old game engine and giving it a graphical overhaul, in hindsight, reeked of complacency. This was one abortive project that everyone has something to learn from."

— Neil West, then-editor-in-chief, *Next Generation*

"Part of the problem was that we were trying to do too many new things for the first time. We'd never done a 3D game before. We'd just purchased our first copy of Alias. We'd never done a CD product before. We'd never programmed in C before. Also, PlayStation was a whole new system. Obviously we didn't have any experience with it, and Sony's development environment took a while to get used to. We were overloaded with firsts, and this undoubtedly led to problems."

— Anonymous, member of Madden '96 development team

"Just as Madden '96 was preparing to launch, we saw the commercials of *GameDay*... We were blown away, and we panicked"

Member of Madden '96 development team

impressive *GameDay* debut. To EA, it was all of the above — and perhaps most importantly, a test of the company's ability to remain on the cutting edge.

Visual Concepts was contracted as the game's developer, and all the right noises seemed to be coming from EA's San Mateo, California, headquarters. Towards the end of the summer of 1995, *Next Generation* approached EA and asked if it could exclusively break the Madden '96 story in exchange for featuring the game on its cover. EA agreed, and in October of 1995, the cover of *Next Generation* proclaimed that "Madden's back!"

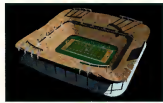
What actually happened:

The game was killed at the 11th hour, with advertising space booked and journalists sent "finished" copies for review. EA, obviously aware that Sony's *GameDay* threatened to do to Madden on PlayStation what Madden had itself done to so many of its 16-bit rivals, decided that discretion was the better part of valor and pulled the plug. Better not to muddy the Madden brand with a second-rate product. It wisely decided, and a year later EA released an all-new PlayStation Madden title, developed in conjunction with Florida-based Tiburon Studios.

For canceling Madden '96 at the last minute — surely one of the toughest decisions made in videogame history — EA should be applauded. For the complacency that led to such a painful predicament, the company learned a hard and very expensive lesson.

Eyewitness testimony:

"In retrospect, alarm bells were ringing long before the game actually got canned. But neither I nor anyone else paid attention to them. I mean, this was the



EA killed Madden '96 at the last minute, too late for NO to stop the presses on its issue 10 cover that proclaimed, "Madden's back!"

"The focus was never on gameplay. The main goal was to create that 'TV' feel. We spent a long, long time working on building a computer model of the Fox TV studio. We had the blimp. We had film shoots with John Madden and all the Fox crew. We had Leslie Visser reporting from the sideline. We had so much of this shit, you have no idea."

"Also, Madden '96's game code was based on the 3D0 version because it had also been written in C. This code was written by nongame programmers EA had hired to rework the original Madden code, and it was terrible. The Madden game that was eventually released from Tiburon went back to using EA's Genesis's Madden code, and the gameplay results were a lot better."

— Anonymous, member of Madden '96 development team

"[EA didn't] ship Madden NFL '96 on PlayStation because the product did not meet the high standards of the EA Sports brand, which we don't take lightly. While the decision was extremely disappointing to EA and many consumers, we believe that shipping a product we couldn't stand behind would have been far worse. We'd make the same decision today. We were gratified that our customers agreed with the decision by casting their vote with their dollar the following year — Madden NFL '97 was the number one football game in the world and continues to hold that top billing in 1998."

— Bing Gordon, executive VP of marketing & co-founder, Electronic Arts

"You want to know what tipped the project over the edge? Just as Madden '96 was preparing to launch, we saw the TV commercials of Sony's *GameDay*. We saw these big characters moving really fast and thought that this was how the game would really play. We didn't know that the game footage had been sped up, edited, and zoomed in. We were blown away, and we panicked."

— Anonymous, member of Madden '96 development team



Toonstruck

Format: PC

Publisher: Virgin Interactive Entertainment

Developer: Burst!

Date of project start: October 1993

Date of project completion: November 1996

Bottom Line:

Perhaps the most neglected — and hopefully the last — love child of Hollywood and Silicon Valley's 1993 brief flirtation.

What was meant to happen:

At a time when "Sillwood" fever gripped the industry, Toonstruck was conceived as an interactive *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* In reverse, starring a real-world video-captured character in a fully animated cartoon environment. Hollywood star Christopher Lloyd (of *Back to the Future* fame) and well-known voice-over personalities (including Tim Curry, Dom DeLuise, Ben Stiller, and Dan Castellaneta, the voice of Homer Simpson) were signed up, and more than two hours of top-quality animation was commissioned. Virgin always acknowledged that Toonstruck's price tag would be high, but this was OK. The aim was to create a high-production-value blockbuster and put Burst! (Virgin's in-house production studio) on the videogame map.

What actually happened:

Now openly acknowledged as a ridiculously overambitious project, Toonstruck had production costs that were staggering from the start — and they quickly spiraled higher. In retrospect it's obvious that the studio bit off more than it could comfortably chew, and fundamental mistakes made at an early stage came back to haunt the project as it neared completion. First, more than one Virgin insider hints that the animated material was produced at an unnecessarily high level of sophistication — exceeding the quality (and hence, cost) of even Disney animated movies. Second, Toonstruck's woes were only exacerbated when problems with the game engine (an old piece of Westwood technology that had been used to create the *Kyondio* series) required the project's large and expensive development team to spend an extra 18 months ironing out glitches. Consequently, the project was delivered almost two years late and at a final development cost of well over \$8 million.

Virgin released the title, only to discover that despite reasonable critical acclaim, the gaming public simply wasn't interested in playing a cartoon-style, point-and-click adventure. Sales in the U.S. were slow, and in Europe — a crucial territory for Virgin — they were almost nonexistent.

Eyewitness testimony:

"When Toonstruck started, none of the managers at Virgin's internal development studio had any idea how massive and involved its production was

really going to be. After a year of development it started running into problems, but too much money had already been sunk into the project to can it. So production continued as costs spiraled out of control.

"The real problem was that Toonstruck always looked really impressive thanks to its amazing cartoon visuals, which led to the belief that it was going to be a AAA title and blow the public away. The only thing that got blown was vast amounts of

cash, and the public stayed away."

— Anonymous, then-Virgin Interactive Entertainment employee

"There have always been games that have met with critical acclaim but have not attained the commercial success that they perhaps deserve. Virgin Interactive admits that it would have liked to have seen higher sales for Toonstruck, but we have sold in excess of 150,000 units worldwide, which is

"Only 35% of all this super-expensive animation ever made it into the finished game"

— Then-Toonstruck team member



With animation quality exceeding that of Disney movies, Toonstruck cost more than \$8 million and sold horrendously

nothing to be ashamed of!"

— Simon Jeffery, VP of marketing, VIE

"Only 35% of all this super-expensive animation ever made it into the finished game. Towards the end of development, the team was told to 'cut it or can it' — it either had to be shipped real soon, or not at all."

— Anonymous, then-Toonstruck team member

"For a successful product, you not only need a good game, but you need a sales and marketing department that is passionate, cares about the game, and knows how to push all the right buttons. Toonstruck didn't have this. It also had the worst packaging I've ever seen — on both sides of the Atlantic. [It] sent a mixed message. As soon as you have the word 'cartoon' associated with a game, it aims it at a young audience. But this was a game for adults with a lot of adult content. This message needed to be shouted from the rooftops, but it wasn't."

— David Bishop, then-executive producer of Toonstruck

"Mistakes were made at every step, so everyone was at fault. But then everyone had contributed some great ideas and energy, so everyone helped also. At the end, a lot of internal politics made the situation worse. Some of the project leaders didn't get on with other senior staff, and some people had friendships to protect. So there was finger-pointing and back-slapping going on at the same time. But the whole team put its heart and soul into it, and that's why Toonstruck's poor performance was so sad."

— Anonymous, then-Virgin Interactive Entertainment employee

Fight For Life

Format: Jaguar

Publisher: Atari

Developer: Atari

Date of project start: May 1994

Date of project completion: December 1995

Bottom Line:

At worst, *Fight for Life's* failure to impress was the final nail in Jaguar's — and hence Atari's — coffin. At best, it was the wreath.

What was meant to happen:

Late in 1994, with PlayStation and Saturn looming, Atari's Jaguar needed to consolidate its head start and grab itself a large chunk of the next generation console marketplace while it could still claim to be the most powerful videogame hardware available. With *Virtua Fighter* a dead certainty for Saturn, and screenshots of mysterious PlayStation projects named Tekken and Toshinden starting to circulate, Atari decided that it also needed a polygonal fighting game. *Fight for Life* was named Jaguar's flagship project. François Yves-Bertrand, fresh from Sega AM2's *Virtua Fighter* team, was hired as lead programmer. Excited Jaguar gamers eagerly awaited *Fight for Life's* release, scheduled for December 1995.

What actually happened:

After suffering innumerable delays, *Fight for Life* eventually shipped in April of 1996. But by this time, PlayStation and Saturn were rapidly eroding Jaguar's tender foothold in the U.S. market, and it was becoming increasingly obvious that Atari was quite dead.

And as for the game itself, well, the Atari faithful lauded it as the finest fighting game of the decade. But then there were the same people who could look you in the eye and tell you that clearly, *Club Drive* is a superior driving simulator to *Dynasty USA* and that Jeff Minter can legitimately be compared to the Pope. In reality, *Fight for Life* struggled from a gameplay perspective. And with the team's dismal failure to squeeze anything like PlayStation- or Saturn-quality visuals from Atari's "technically superior" Jaguar, the "is it or isn't it?" debate surrounding the jag's alleged 64 bits became academic. Jaguar was washed up.

Eyewitness testimony:

"I inherited the project after the first producer left the company. I'm just trying to forget the whole nightmare — that's why I asked for my name to be removed from the credits."

— Anonymous, then-Fight for Life's producer

"Despite all the delays, production disasters, and the game's obvious limitations, *Fight for Life's* original producer was able to constantly bullshit upper management into believing that the game really would redefine the 3D fighting genre. I was



Fight for Life for Jaguar didn't stand a chance against *Virtua Fighter*, *Toshinden*, and *Yekken*

once at a meeting in which *Fight for Life* on a wide-screen TV was compared head-to-head with Tekken. In a classic case of upper management "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil," Atari executives nodded, smiled, and agreed that *Fight for Life* was a legitimate competitor to Tekken and Toshinden. It was unbelievable."

— Anonymous, then-Atari employee

"At the time, Atari was not in good shape. From a financial point of view, the company was struggling. From a technical point of view, the Jaguar was outdated before developers could really get a hang of it. From the press' point of view, well, Atari wasn't really the cat the press was betting on. From a distribution point of view, the Jaguar never really made it. So Atari wasn't really the best place to be. And sure, *Fight for Life* wasn't a *Virtua Fighter* or a Tekken, but then the Jaguar wasn't a PlayStation either. And for those gamers who did invest their money in a system which was less than perfect, I know most were happy that some developers were spending time trying to do what they could."

— François Yves-Bertrand, lead programmer of *Fight for Life*

LodeStar: The Legend of Tully Bodine

Format: Sega CD and PC

Publisher: Rocket Science

Developer: Rocket Science

Date of project start: October 1993

Date of project completion: September 1994

Bottom Line:

Wire's favorites and the "poster child" of 1993's multimedia boom failed to live up to the hype but did manage to squander a bucket load of venture capital.

What was meant to happen:

With the possible exception of Trip Hawkins and the 3DO company, no videogame outfit has ever been the subject of such sensationalist hype as Rocket Science. In 1993, California's "multimedia boom" was reaching a crescendo. At the time, "digital artists" were reeling with the potential offered by CD; FMV on any kind of computer format still impressed; and the marriage of Hollywood and Silicon Valley (to create "Silwood") seemed not so much inevitably arranged as overseen by needs carrying shotguns. Rocket Science quickly became the poster child of this movement and served as a lightning rod for all the excitement and hype that it generated. With the hiring of Ron Cobb (the conceptual designer of *Aliens*) and some of Silicon Valley's finest engineers (who would go on to create WebTV), buckets of investment capital at their disposal, and luxurious offices in Palo Alto, San Francisco, and Berkeley, Rocket Science was hailed on the cover of *Wired* as "the first digital supergroup." *The Wall Street Journal* gushed about its potential. *LodeStar: The Legend of Tully Bodine* was announced as the company's first game. And the world held its breath...

What actually happened:

LodeStar completely sucked. Hobbled by the limitations of Sega CD (Sega had invested heavily in the company and demanded that the game appear first on its last-ditcher system), the game featured genuine technical smarts that were unable to shine. Which left it to stand or fall based on its gameplay. The problem there being that, well, it didn't really have any. And it bombed.

The subsequent PC version looked a whole lot better, but the damage was already done. Management manfully ate an unhealthy amount of crow pie in the aftermath, and for a while Rocket Science gallantly announced plans to regroup with a new product lineup. But the bubble had burst, the investors had fled, and soon the motto, "The taller they come, the harder they fall," could be read on yet another corporate gravestone.

Eyewitness testimony:

"It was obvious that no one at Rocket Science had any clue as to what a videogame was all about. In the summer of 1994, NG visited their offices and they showed us walls of exquisite storyboards. We saw banks of SGI workstations. They had the most amazingly detailed cardboard models. And the technology demos were jaw-

dropping. 'Great,' we said, 'but where's the game?' They just kind of stared blankly back at us."

— Neil West, former editor-in-chief, *Next Generation*

"Rocket Science had all its priorities wrong. They spent all their energies making these gorgeous graphics, and so when it came time to delivering gameplay, well, there was no time for that. They had people from IBM, and the quality they worked to went far beyond that which was actually needed. The gameplay was viewed as almost irrelevant. The Sega CD version that was shipped was pretty much the first version we produced that had no obvious bugs. To pass Sega's testing procedure, it simply had to play for a certain number of hours without crashing — and it could do this, just. But there was no quality control as such. There was no play testing. No one bothered to find out if it played any good. No one spent any time trying to make it fun. And although it passed the tests, all the Sega people hated it. Technologically the game was a masterpiece — it was heroic engineering. But it didn't take long for gamers to give the thumbs down to FMV. They weren't interested in seeing poor-resolution, second-rate movies."

"Why was this allowed to happen? Too many people within the company saw Rocket Science as a means of getting into Hollywood. They didn't want to make games, they wanted to hang around Hollywood sound stages getting messages from good-looking babes. What did they know about games? Nothing. Steve Blank, the CEO, was a very smart guy but he wasn't a gamer — he wouldn't even let his own kids play videogames. I was the hired 'expert,' but they didn't listen to me."

"It was a silly time. The Rocket Science executives were out to be Hollywood moguls, and to their credit, they got hold of some serious money, and to start off with, it seemed as if it was going to be a really fun gig. And they got most of it right. If we'd put *LodeStar* on the PC first, and before Rebel Assault, it might have worked. But the *Wired* cover should have warned us. I mean, *Wired* is the kiss of death. If they're on top of you, then you should know that you're already out of date."

"Ultimately, working with Ron Cobb was a great privilege. I spent time with some wonderful people, and the engineers were heroic — but I think we all learned a very expensive lesson."

— Brian Moriarty, then-senior games designer, Rocket Science

Microcosm

Format: PC, Sega CD, FM Towns
Publisher: Psygnosis
Developer: Psygnosis
Date of project start: Early 1993
Date of project completion: 1994
Bottom Line:

The excitement and hope surrounding CD-ROM's introduction focuses on one flagship game — with disastrous results.

What was meant to happen:

Before enjoying success on PlayStation, Psygnosis ushered in the CD-ROM gaming era with the Fantastic Voyage-cum-After Burner game *Microcosm*. And in retrospect you can see what it was trying to do: Prior to this, the one thing gamers never had was video footage. CD-ROM offered this option, so Psygnosis set about delivering it. The big problem, of course, was in trying to make the video interactive. Which, of course, it wasn't.

What actually happened:

After a stunning introductory sequence, *Microcosm's* gameplay proved to be merely a lackluster shoot-'em-up. In a tube. With little or no attention paid to playability, it's quite obvious that this was always going to be less of a game than it was a technology demo.

One of the project's artists kind of summed it all up when he said, "The idea was to get a visual feast and tie a game in there somewhere as well." But with the gameplay taking a backseat from the get-go, the fact was that *Microcosm* never really was a game at all: The paltry 400k of game code used up a whopping 0.1% of the disc space and consisted of the movie player and a bit of collision detection. Rocket science, it wasn't. (At least, in the traditional sense of the term — for a more contemporary use of the term, see the story of *LodeStar: The Legend of Yuli Badine*.)

In hindsight, it's easy to see that the *Microcosm* project was a neat way for Psygnosis to test a new format, try out some new technology, get some stunning rendered artwork into a few magazines, and then — by putting these experiments in a box and selling it as a game — generate some revenue to help offset the cost of this research. But, of course, someone's always got to pay the bill eventually. And in this case, this unfortunate someone was the gamer.

Eyewitness testimony:

"When Psygnosis first had the product, they ushered a bunch of journalists into a little room for a screening. Dutifully we all sat through the seven-minute intro and were kind of impressed in a 'well, you've ripped off *Blade Runner* and *Aliens* really badly but managed to

squeeze it on a CD-ROM' kind of way. As soon as the in-game stuff started, everyone wandered off.

"When, during *Microcosm's* development, the lead programmer is quoted as saying: 'The one thing we've got to be careful of is that we don't just take 600MB of storage space, bung anything on there, and say \$49.99 the game,' you've got to raise a wry smile, haven't you?"

— Steve Jarratt, then-editor, *Edge* magazine

"Despite its now-obvious gameplay faults and flaws, you have to remember that while developing *Microcosm*, one of the world's first CD-ROM games, we had no one else's mistakes to learn from. As the hardware platforms we were dealing with — Commodore's ill-fated CDTV and CD32 machines, and Sega CD — obviously hampered its potential. There was also a shortage of hype surrounding CD as a format at this time, and people got a little too carried away with what they believed the CD-ROM format could deliver. Simply because CDs offered 500 times the storage space of a floppy disk, people expected the games to be 500 times better.

"All that said, we don't think *Microcosm* was the flop it is often perceived to be. It was a commercial success for Psygnosis and did at least show people that the CD-ROM format, while nowhere near perfect yet, could deliver incredible audio/visual advances. *Microcosm* also led to *NovoStorm*, which eventually led to *Wipeout*. In this context, we think that our experimentation was worth it."

— Glen O'Connell, spokesperson, Psygnosis

"OK, we admit it. Playing *Microcosm* looked like TV footage of surgery in which one of those rectal probes is rammed up someone's ass. Playing it was a similar experience, too."

— Anonymous, Psygnosis employee



Microcosm may have looked nice, but it was barely a game at all

Shaq Fu

Format: Super NES, Genesis
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: Delphine
Date of project start: Mid-1993
Date of project completion: November 1994
Bottom Line:

It was a fighting game featuring Shaquille O'Neal — and the first big sign that 16-bit gaming might be turning sour ...

What was meant to happen:

In late 1993 it must have seemed to EA that — on paper, at least — *Shaq Fu* couldn't fail. For a developer, EA had signed up French studio Delphine, the hot developer of the moment, having recently enjoyed both commercial and critical success with *Fleshback*. "Rotoscoping" was the current technological buzzword (a relatively clumsy process of turning video footage into frames of animation), and *Shaq Fu* was to have it in buckets. Fighting games showed no signs of waning in appeal to a booming 16-bit audience, clamoring for yet more and more virtual blood. A multimillion-dollar marketing budget was allocated. Shaquille O'Neal himself was the star of the show. Hell, there was even a rap album, also called *Shaq Fu*, due to be released simultaneously.

All the ingredients were in place for yet another 16-bit smash from the world's most powerful third-party publisher.

What actually happened:

Um, except that someone forgot about the gameplay. Once again, the single most important element of the videogame experience was sacrificed at the altar of marketing "angles" and a big-name license.

It quickly became obvious to anyone who picked up a joystick that "rotoscoped" animation was wholly inappropriate to the fighting game genre. The technique, which enables fluid sequences of realistic-looking motion, is great for slow-paced platform adventures like *Fleshback* but can't cope with the lightning-quick reactions games demand of a fighting game. Press a button and *Shaq* would commence, say, a roundhouse kick. He would then have to complete his move — in all its rotscooped glory — before players would be able to launch a new move. Playing *Shaq Fu* was realistic in as much as it proved to be extremely painful.

There have been plenty of games worse than *Shaq Fu*. And EA will boast that it managed to sell all of the Genesis and Super NES cartridges it manufactured. But the majority went at a substantially discounted rate, and the fact that they sold at all says more about EA's considerable distribution and retail muscle than it does about the quality of the game. And the *Shaq Fu* story is included in this feature because it exemplifies the most common mistake behind most of the industry's failures — the mistake of forgetting what it is that gamers really want. And that, of course,



Shaq as a fighter just didn't cut it for the public; plus, the game was sinfully slow

is a good game.

Eyewitness testimony:

"I was a reviewer in England when this was released, and I didn't know who the hell *Shaq* was. I remember thinking, 'Who is this guy, and what's he doing in this crap fighting game?' When I discovered he was a top basketball player, I was dumbfounded. The game just didn't make any sense."

— Julien Rignall, editorial director, Imagine Games Network

"We had Shaquille O'Neal signed up for a game, but we didn't really know what to do with him. Someone heard that *Shaq* was into martial arts and thought, 'Hey, why not do a fighting game?' And this sounded like a pretty neat idea. Then we figured that seeing as we've got access to Shaquille O'Neal, we really ought to make the most of the opportunity. We didn't want to just feature a game sprite that looked a bit like him. What would be the point? So this is where the idea for using Delphine's rotscooping technology came from. It all seemed to make sense. But I guess in the end you've got to conclude that it was executed as well as anyone could have hoped, and it's not as if anyone really screwed up. It was just a lousy idea to begin with."

— Anonymous, then-employee of EA

"The key learning from *Shaq Fu* — and *Michael Jordan: Chaos in the Windy City* — was painful but simple. Don't make sports figures into cartoon characters."

— Bing Gordon, executive VP of marketing & co-founder, Electronic Arts

ng special



Battle Cruiser 3000AD

Format: PC

Publisher: Take 2

Developer: Derek Smart/3000AD

Date of project start: 1989

Date of project completion: Ongoing

Bottom Line:

The single most delayed, troubled, and contentious game of all time. It's still questionable as to whether the game is really done.

What was meant to happen:

Not simply a one-off title, but rather a "highly advanced gaming system" (in the words of creator Dr. Derek Smart), *Battle Cruiser 3000AD* remains one of the most ambitious games ever attempted. Smart's aim was to produce the "ultimate computer game," an entire artificial universe populated by computer-generated life-forms based on neural network technology. The game would think and learn for itself,

respond to the player's actions, and offer the most realistic gaming experience ever devised.

"I am the greatest programmer in the world," Smart allegedly once bragged to a fellow programmer. He at least always seemed confident that, despite the project's extreme level of ambition, he could pull it off. *Battle Cruiser 3000AD* was conceived in 1989, early demonstrations were shown at trade shows in 1992, and a release date of April

months after its initial launch. Some die-hard fans can't get enough of it, but the majority of gamers now simply wonder what all the fuss was about. The sequel, *Battle Cruiser 3030AD*, is currently in development.

Eyewitness testimony:

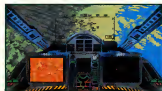
"To some, Smart was a perfectionist, working hard to code a groundbreaking piece of software, and he would get it right at all costs, no matter what the delays — a noble figure fighting the corporate money men. Or maybe he was a snake oil salesman, promising castles built on the clouds to increase his own fame and to milk money from publishers. Or maybe he was just an average guy with a good idea, who wanted to do it right but made promises he couldn't keep. His volatile and quirky personality makes it hard to determine the truth."

— T. Liam McDonald, columnist for *Boot* magazine and observer of the BCG project

"Was I insane when I started this? Hell yeah!

Because I had to be stark raving nuts to think that I could pull this off in 1989 and stick with it for eight years"

Derek Smart, creator of *Battle Cruiser 3000*



1993 was announced to the press. But development quickly got bogged down, and the game passed through the hands of several publishers before finally reaching store shelves, courtesy of Take 2, in October of 1996.

What actually happened:

The only problem being that the game still wasn't actually finished yet. At least, this is what Smart alleges, accusing Take 2 of a "botched" release. What is certain is that the game crashed constantly, wouldn't play past the second mission, and had both gamers and reviewers scratching their heads in confusion. Patches were quickly issued to rectify the problems, but most simply caused further glitches. "This is the first time I ever had to wait for a game's third patch before I could play it long enough to decide what was going on," one reviewer lamented. "This is also the first time I've had to wonder if one of my reviews will garner me a lawsuit, as threats seem to fall like rain around anybody who says anything untoward about this product in print..."

Yes, by this time, accusations of blame were flying thick and fast between Smart and Take 2, and commentators seeking to work out what the hell was going on risked getting caught in the cross fire. In one notable exchange on AOL, Smart, in the midst of a 1,000-word rant, publicly called Mark Seremet, Take 2's president, an "idiot." Take 2 responded by insinuating that any problems with the game were of Smart's own making, and his alone.

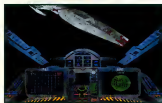
Subsequent releases and patches have made the game playable, and *Battle Cruiser 3000* continues to impress/baffle/anger gamers almost 18

"Was I insane when I started this? Hell yeah! Because I had to be stark raving nuts to think that I could pull this off in 1989 and stick with it for eight years. People call me crazy and say I need therapy. [but] I love being insane because it puts me in a state of mind that allows me to not only tap into my own intuition and do what the hell I want, but also to put up with all this bullshit that's going on in this industry. It also puts me beyond caring what the next person thinks. No sane person could have done all this. Any sane person would have bailed."

— Dr. Derek Smart, creator of *Battle Cruiser 3000*

"We have no comment."

— Take 2



Battle Cruiser 3000 was released before it was finished — probably why gamers couldn't get past the second mission



One major release and three patches later, the game was somewhat playable



E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial

Format: Atari 2600

Publisher: Atari

Developer: Atari

Date of project start: July 23, 1982

Date of project completion: September 1, 1982

Bottom Line:

With total costs estimated at more than \$125 million and total revenues estimated at less than \$25 million, well, the whole industry did the math. The great videogame crash of the early 1980s began right here ...

What was meant to happen:

In late 1982, Atari needed help. Although more than 20 million Atari 2600 consoles had been sold in North America, only 10 million were in active use, and the technology was aging fast. The Vectrex and the ColecoVision were cool new machines on the block, and both offered more than the primitive 2600. However, Atari had deeper pockets than its competitors and could afford to launch a bold defense of its market. Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* was the biggest phenomenon to hit the U.S. in years, and for \$25 million, Atari secured the rights to produce the game of the movie. On October 25, 1982, *Newsweek* heralded the imminent release of *E.T.* as Atari's "biggest coup," and the stage was set for the cartridge that would cement Atari's dominance of the videogame industry and rocket the 2600's appeal beyond that of its competitors.

What actually happened:

The game sucked. And we mean it really sucked. Ask anyone who played it. It's probably one of the worst games ever created. And it bombed.

Following the substandard conversion of *Pac-Man* earlier in 1982, many 2600 gamers had lost faith in Atari and refused to buy any more software. Those gamers who remained loyal exercised extreme caution before parting with their cash, and word soon spread that *E.T.* was even worse than *Pac-Man*. It soon became obvious to everyone that Atari would never sell the six million cartridges it had manufactured, and prices began to plummet. On December 7, Atari executives announced that they were cutting their 1982 revenue forecasts from a whopping 50% increase over 1981 levels to a meager 15%. The business world panicked, and by the end of the day, the price of Warner (the owners of Atari) stock dropped almost a third from 52 to 35. Even Atari President Ray Kassar hurriedly unloaded 5,000 of his shares (half an hour before announcing the revenue forecast cuts to the public).

Copies of *E.T.* ended up gathering dust in "less than a dollar" bins across the country, approximately five million unsold cartridges were buried in the New Mexico desert, gamers abandoned the 2600 en masse, and the great videogame crash of the early 1980s had begun. And if the game that prompted such disaster looked as if one person had cobbled it together in just six weeks, that's because this is exactly how it was created.

Eyewitness testimony:

"I asked Steve [Ross, then-president of Warner Communications], 'When do we have to produce this *E.T.* game?' and he said for Christmas of 1982. This was the end of July when he called me. I said, 'Steve, the time it takes to produce a game is at least six months — this is impossible.' He said, 'Well, you have to do it because I promised Spielberg we'd have it on retail shelves for

Christmas.' So we had literally six weeks to produce a brand new game, manufacture it, package it, and market it. It was a disaster."

— Ray Kassar, then-president of Atari

"Ray called me up personally. He said, 'Howard, we need *E.T.*' This was July 23. He said, 'We need it by September 1. Can you do it?' and I said, 'Yeah.'"

— Howard Scott Warshaw, programmer of *E.T.*

"I have an *E.T.* cartridge sitting in my office. It has five price stickers on it. The first one is \$49.95, the last one is 99¢"

AL NELSON, ex-buyer, JC Penney



"I remember buying *E.T.*, taking it home, and turning it on. I fell into a hole and couldn't get out. I tried again. The same thing happened. I went all the way back to the store and demanded my money back. I think I bought some comics instead."

— Trent Ward, ex-reviews editor, *Next Generation*

"I have an *E.T.* cartridge sitting in my office. It has five price stickers on it. The first one is \$49.95, the last one is 99¢. I paid 75¢ for it at retail."

— Al Nielsen, ex-buyer for JC Penney



The very little time devoted to developing *E.T.* (40 days, to be exact) showed in every single aspect of the game

This is

SaGa Frontier™

A place where you will
wander through vast palaces.

Seek salvation in lush jungles.
And shop in dark cities.

You will hone your magical skills.
Face malicious opponents.

And probably end up with a multiple
personality disorder.

Because you haven't achieved
anything

until you've lived the lives
and completed the quests

of 7 different people.



Eurhia



Lute



Red



Asellus



T260G



Riki



Blue

WELCOME TO YOUR
IDENTITY CRISIS.

SHINGROW PALACE

*Nothing's as good as revenge. As Red,
you'll battle Black X, the man who killed
your family. As Eurhia, you'll enter
the martial arts tournament to avenge the
death of your lover. Just remember
to stretch before strenuous activity.*



YORKLAND

*Serenity. Nature. A windmill. This is
Yorkland, the birthplace of the musician
Lute. But, as Riki, a millionaire
gives you a ring. No, it's not love. It's
one of the 8 legendary rings you
need to save your decaying planet.*

MANHATTAN

The busiest shopping mall. And a prison. As Red, Manhattan is the beginning of the end of your quest. As Emelio, this is just the beginning of the beginning.

KOORONG

It's a dirty metropolis and a hotbed of crime. As Blue, this is where you set off on the quest to kill your twin brother. And as the robot T260G, your lost past forces you to ask such questions as: Who am I? What is my mission? And, where can I find a good mechanic?

DEVIN

"I see a shiny new gun in your future." Small stalls offer fortune-telling services. This is also where Blue and Emelio attain some wisdom on the Rune quest.



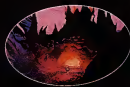
Meet exciting people and shoot, stab or put spells on them.

Lose yourself in breathtaking views as you run for your life.

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alphas

Minty-fresh previews

With war, baseball, bowling, and Harley-riding videogames rounding out the Alphas section this month, it is surprising this isn't the July issue, given the amount of Americana provided herein. And given that many Americans believe they've seen UFOs, Shot and Space Bunnies Must Die should appeal to our culture's infatuation with sci-fi, especially the B-movie variety. But enough flag waving — let's face it, games are really about our own, private power trip. A game gives us the chance to create our own order, or anarchy, and exercise unusual and irrational forces in the process. Which brings us to our lead story, Metal Gear Solid. Can a game still empower a player with time-honored gameplay and revolutionize at the same time? Sure it can. Turn to page 52 and find out how.

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Metal Gear Solid



Solid Snake is back, and looking more solid than ever (pardon the pun)

The history of PlayStation is marked by a handful of highly original, groundbreaking titles that offered new heights of gameplay. Tomb Raider blew the doors off 3D gameplay, offering action and exploration in a fully immersive environment. Resident Evil offered 3D characters on a 2D background but upped the ante on cinematic atmosphere and creepy style, scaring the virtual pants off many gamers in the process.

Which brings us to Metal Gear Solid, a game that is shaping up to be the culmination of this particular cycle in PlayStation history, offering fully 3D

A cult hit comes back with new technology and a stronger story but still features the same hook that made the original so memorable

Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	Konami
Developer:	Konami
Release Date:	Fall 1998
Origin:	Japan

environments, hard-hitting action, and a highly cinematic, even melodramatic storyline. Due to arrive in late 1998, and with rumors of PlayStation 2 set to arrive in 1999, Metal Gear Solid may



Alone, outfitted with the barest minimum of arms and equipment, Solid Snake has to infiltrate a nuclear warehouse and save the world from destruction. To succeed, he'll have to be a good shot, and he'll have to be damn sneaky

ng alphas



Anyone who's played the original 8-bit games will recognize the gameplay values and production design

have the right to claim its spot as the last truly great 32-bit game.

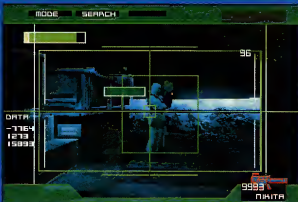
The game is based on the surprisingly successful and innovative *Metal Gear*, released way back in July 1987 (see sidebar), the impressive debut for creator Hideo Kojima. But *Metal Gear Solid* updates the original's central gameplay idea for the polygon era. What set the original apart from the other shooting/action games of the period was that it forced the player to actually avoid getting into too many encounters with the enemy. Lightly armed and surrounded by hostile forces, players had to rely on stealth and keep well out of sight to avoid sounding alarms and finding themselves on the end of more trouble than it was possible to deal with. This

simple injection of realism introduced elements of strategy and more than a little tension into a gameplay landscape that was quickly becoming flooded with mindless action titles.

For *Metal Gear Solid*, players have to follow much the same strategy: keeping low, slipping by guards and sentries, and generally keeping out of sight, at least for a while. The world of 3D, however, offers numerous additional places to hide, including air ducts and service tunnels, as well as new obstacles like surveillance cameras. Players will have to deal with some guards directly, and they will have to be very careful about picking and choosing which battles can be fought and won with a minimum of commotion. The perspective can be



Both third- and first-person views offer new gameplay twists



Even years ago, Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear* introduced players to an action game that looked like a shooter but came packed with a storyline that was a little Tom Clancy, a little Rambo, and a whole lot of futuristic anime. In fact, for what may have been the first time, players had to hide from enemies and sneak into rooms in order to progress through the game. The action was presented in a 2D, top-down perspective, with enemies' reactions graphically represented as large exclamation points and question marks.

As Konami readies *Metal Gear Solid*, bringing the franchise into a 3D cinematic world, it seems appropriate to look back at what started it all in a time before polygons.

Metal Gear

Platform: MSX

Release Date: 1987



Plot: A global terrorist network led by Colonel Vernon Catalfly has created the ultimate weapon of destruction: *Metal Gear*. As Solid Snake, the player must infiltrate the country of Outer Heaven and destroy *Metal Gear* before the final hour.

Development Notes:

Metal Gear was the first project Kojima Productions developed for Konami. Later the team was responsible for the popular (in Japan, anyway) *Snatcher* and *Policeouts*. Naturally, the MSX version had little impact on the U.S.

market, putting *Metal Gear* Gear's U.S. success on hold until the NES version was released a year later.

Metal Gear

Platform: NES
Release Date: 1988



Plot: See above.

Development Notes:

Kojima and his team had nothing to do with this port, which featured improved graphics and a different level layout than the MSX version. The player's goal remained the same, but despite the switch in developers, feedback from the original made for an even better version the second time around. Released in the U.S. under the short-lived Ultra Games label, *Metal Gear* met with enthusiastic sales, ensuring a sequel.

Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake

Platform: MSX
Release Date: 1990



Plot: It is the late '90s, and worldwide disarmament is taking place everywhere except Zanzibar, where a military government suddenly begins invading nearby countries. Unfortunately, it takes control of a number of nuclear



Naturally, there is a fair amount of action to go with the strategy.

switched from over-the-shoulder, third-person view to first-person view at any time, and this feature enables the addition of special items like binoculars, goggles, and a sniper rifle, the PSG1.

Unlike previous entries in the series, in which the underlying stories were mostly conveyed by briefing screens, the storyline is more integrated into the gameplay. Set in the next century, the game's plot revolves around the takeover of a nuclear weapon disposal warehouse in Alaska by a group of renegade counter-terrorists known as Foxhound. When the Foxhound troops, genetically engineered by the U.S. government to be the ultimate soldiers, decide to stop working for anyone but themselves, they threaten the world with nuclear-equipped robots — the "Metal Gears" of the title. And all the government can do is send in the only Foxhound member who isn't in on the conspiracy, Solid Snake.

With only 24 hours before nuclear obliteration, Solid Snake has to infiltrate the warehouse and stop Foxhound. The catch is that the Foxhound is under the command of Liquid Snake, Solid Snake's ex-best friend. To make things even more interesting, there's also a blooming romance between Solid Snake and a trapped warehouse employee named Meryl Silverburgh. **ING's** cover art this month, who appears far from helpless and becomes a valuable ally as well as love interest.

Throughout the game, Solid Snake will be in contact with his HQ, and other characters will make appearances and have input into the story. The designers' target audience is the 25-year-old age group, so hopefully the plotline will

ng alphas

The designers' target audience is the 25-year-old age group

steer clear of juvenile antics and move towards mature themes. However, this is unlikely to be a real concern, given Kojima's previous efforts, *Snatcher* and *Policenauts*, both of which boasted strong (if heavily anime-influenced) stories and interesting characters.

The attention to detail in the game is quite astounding. Although it was



The designers are approaching the project as an anti-nuclear, anti-war "message" game — just one with guns and explosions

ng alphas



According to creator Hideo Kojima, finding the best camera view in 3D was one of the biggest challenges



Impressive lighting and attention to detail make this a title to watch

coded entirely in C, the Metal Gear team has managed to cram a ridiculous number of polygons through PlayStation's geometry engine. In addition, lighting effects, realistic (if dramatic) explosions, and smoke and haze effects give the game's environments a dense, dark atmosphere.

Although nearly unarmed at the beginning of the game, players will have a chance to upgrade their weapons and equipment, and also gain strength by defeating enemies. Some 50 different inventory items will be at the player's disposal, as well as six types of usable weapons. Many of the weapons and

items in the game are closely patterned after their real-life counterparts, and the Metal Gear team even made a special trip to the U.S. to get some hands-on experience with small arms (guns of all kinds being strictly illegal in Japan).

Metal Gear Solid's production values speak for themselves, and given Kojima's track record with the series, its gameplay is nearly a sure thing as well. All that remains to be seen is whether a cult hit from 11 years ago can garner enough of a new audience to make it a solid hit (no pun intended — well, maybe), but we at **Next Generation** believe it deserves to be one.

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Anyone who played the original games will remember rifling through trucks and other vehicles for items. In Metal Gear Solid, the concept is updated for 3D

disposal sites and becomes a serious threat to the entire world. Zanzibar operatives also manage to kidnap a biologist who has created an alternative to petroleum — a huge problem, since the world's reserves are nearly depleted. It is Snake's job to rescue the scientist and restore order in Zanzibar.

Development Notes:

Kojima returned with this title, creating a graphically intense game that served as the final hurrah for the ailing MSX. Characters in the game resembled famous Hollywood actors, and the game engine was significantly improved to accommodate more complex missions.

Snake's Revenge

Platform: NES

Release Date: 1990



Plot: Solid Snake is called into action once again to destroy Metal Gear before it can release its nuclear arsenal onto the world.

Development Notes:

Again, this port had nothing to do with Kojima. Lacking the kind of scope found in the MSX versions, this was more action than intrigue. That didn't seem to phase an action-hungry NES audience, however, but the sales apparently did not justify a Super NES version, and the franchise languished until Kojima and company returned to it in 1995, after the completion of *Snatcher* and *Polycemsats*.

An interview with

Yoji Shinkawa

A relative newcomer to videogame art and development,

Konami's Yoji Shinkawa certainly has his hands full with *Metal Gear Solid*. In addition to character and prop design, he also handles all the backgrounds.

NG: Was *Metal Gear* the kind of game you had in mind when you joined Konami?

YS: Oh yes, *Metal Gear* has a very heavy and "hard-boiled" atmosphere. I really wanted to make a game like this. When I saw *Metal Gear* on MSX, I thought the game was very cool. It wasn't just a simple game — even after I finished playing it I kept thinking about it, and knew I wanted to make a game that was so entertaining that everybody would remember it. That's why I joined Konami.

NG: So you really like this kind of "hard-boiled" atmosphere?

YS: Yes. It's my taste. I really like dark colors.

NG: Doesn't a dark color scheme make the game difficult to see?

YS: Yes, it's true the game is dark. When I compare *Metal Gear* to other games we see in game magazines, *Metal Gear* sometimes looks very poor graphically; it's difficult to discern the characters from the backgrounds. But in fact, it's not a problem. When the character is moving, it's very easy to see him. Dark colors are not a real problem.

NG: So what took the most care when designing the graphics?

YS: Lighting was the most important thing. In Japanese movies we often see lighting that's very flat. I don't like that. I prefer a blue lighting where dark is really dark and light is very intense. It gives a very cool, rich atmosphere.

NG: How do you decide the characters' details?

YS: I listen to Mr. Kojima's story and the images he has in mind. Sometimes he asks me to change particular details, but I always do the design in my own way. The result is better.

NG: Mr. Kojima entrusted you with all of the graphic design. Is the design completely done internally at Konami?

YS: Yes, it's an internal process. If we asked any external artists, I don't think it could be better than the designer's own imagination.

There are ways to use external design teams, but I prefer to do even small things internally.

NG: The appearance of Solid Snake [the main character] has changed. Why?

YS: I think about that a lot. I saw some illustrations of Solid from the MSX *Metal Gear*, where Solid is a middle-aged guy — Oyajii in Japanese. But we didn't believe this image to

be good for sales, so we drew him again. Now he looks younger than before. I think the Oyajii image is cool, but there's already one older person in the game, so we remade Solid Snake as someone of a different age.

NG: We understand that when you draw some props and hardware, you first make a small, physical model, then draw it. Why?

YS: Yes, that's right. My first job was designing *Metal Gear* prop models. I worked at home about two months and made different models using plastic parts. Each time I finished a small part I would call the director [Kojima] and report it. From going over the model, I drew the illustration and put it in the game.

NG: Isn't it difficult to go through all these stages?

YS: I just think it's better and more enjoyable than drawing things directly. But maybe it's just because of my lack of drawing skill [laughs].

NG: Is this just your own special way of doing it?

YS: Yes, but I'm not the only one who uses this technique. For example, some do models with a high level of detail. Some others draw dots, make stick figures, draw it again, and repeat the job many, many times — [my way] is just one way of doing things.

NG: What is the most difficult part of designing 3D graphics?

YS: Well, for example, right now I'm discussing with the director the height of a fence and its proportions. The director says three meters but I said maybe four meters.

NG: Do you think it matters to the end user? -

YS: Yes, we have a policy to care about this small level of detail. Generally in movies, filmmakers care about small details, but that's not the case in games. But we try to ignore the past and what other people are doing. So for *Metal Gear* we are taking care of these small details. I prefer to ignore the old way of making games. I want to make a game like I'd make a movie. I want to do games in my own way. This time the game is a little bit "out of the rails," but that's OK. I don't want to make games in the formal way. [We want] *Metal Gear* to be the sort of game that people have never played before.



An interview with

Hideo Kojima

Undoubtedly one of Konami Japan's greatest assets, Hideo Kojima created the original *Metal Gear*, a landmark for gameplay in the 8-bit age. Currently the producer and director of *Metal Gear Solid*, Kojima met with **Next Generation** to discuss the project in Konami's new offices, located in Tokyo's fashionable Ebisu Garden Place.

NG: Which of the games did you design before? You made the first MSX version, correct?

HK: Yes, the MSX *Metal Gear* was my first game. I also made *Solid Snake*. The present *Metal Gear Solid* staff is different from the staff of *Metal Gear* and *Solid Snake*. After the first MSX *Metal Gear*, we all went in different directions. However, Policenauts and the current *Metal Gear* have had almost the same staff, with the exception of Kazuki Murakami, who is doing the music.



NG: Is the game shown in the video actually running on PlayStation?

HK: Yes, the game is already running fully on PlayStation. For the video we did make the camera move around a lot. It will be different in the final game.

NG: Is the gameplay similar to the MSX version?

HK: The gameplay is based on the same principle: You have to avoid being discovered by the enemy. But everything is now in polygons, and the player can jump from the over-the-shoulder view to a first-person view. With this feature, different things become possible, like the use of a sniper rifle, the PSG1, for example; and it will be possible to zoom in on things located at a distance of 50-60 meters. But the basic game system will stay the same — when you're discovered, numerous enemies will come down



I wanted to make a *Metal Gear* in polygons when I heard rumors about PlayStation

on you, and by running away or killing all the enemies, you can return to the initial, stealthlike situation.

NG: How is the story linked to the previous games?

HK: The story takes place after the first story. A few old characters will appear, but even people who never played the MSX version will be able to get into the game easily.

NG: Is the game nonlinear?

HK: Mostly there's one main story, but in fact there will be two endings, although each ending will carry the main theme. The game won't feature any bad endings.

NG: How many characters will appear in the game?

HK: It will be possible to play as only one character: Solid Snake. About 20 other characters will appear throughout the game — enemies, terrorists, Snake's friends. A few subplots will also be introduced. As far as characters known by name, though, there are about 20.

NG: How big is the game? How many hours of play will be included?

HK: We don't know yet. Yesterday we finished recording the dialogue, which is about three hours worth over the course of the game. But we don't want the game to be too long. The target age is about 25 years old, and these people don't have as much time to play.

NG: When did you begin development?

HK: That's a difficult question. The first time I wanted to make a *Metal Gear* in polygons was when I heard rumors about the PlayStation. So, I've had this project in mind since around 1994. At that time the main story was worked out, and the main artist, Yoji Shinkawa, started work on the design. In September '96 we started to work actively on the project's development. It's our team's first polygon game, and in fact it's also my first polygon game. The main programmer started to work on the project alone in 1995. Till now we



moved our offices from Osaka to Tokyo, and we started to gather the members to really start the development.

NG: What's been the most difficult part of the development?

HK: Surely the 3D environment. It's our first time. We had to make the models, make them move, and manage the light. We were worried about it at the beginning.

NG: Did you experience any problems with speed or CPU power?

HK: No, the speed was fine. We have a refresh rate of 1/30 second. But we did have some difficulties. We made models of buildings and put in some characters, but some items weren't realistic because the proportions were wrong — doors were too small, tables not the right size. Even by using a mock-up it was difficult to build things in the right proportions. It was difficult to obtain a good balance. To find the best point of view and to simulate some camera movement, we used a mini-8mm camera and moved it around a Lego mock-up. We made the last demo like this.

NG: Do you think you've used 100% of PlayStation's capacity?

HK: We asked a lot of the PlayStation, but according to the programmer, there is still a little bit more we could use.

NG: Are there things you couldn't do because of technical hurdles?

HK: There's a lot! It's always the same, though. At the start we concentrated with the programmer on seeing what was possible, and in fact there were no real technical impossibilities, but some



We wanted the motion to be stylized, to be like an animated movie

of the time it wasn't possible to include things because it was harmful to the game. For example, we wanted to simulate a blur and add it to certain scenes. Technically, we succeeded in making a nice blur, but it required too much processing power, and the game slowed down. So actually we should separate impossible things into two categories: things we technically could not do and things that we could do but which would hurt the game. But it's the same problem with any hardware. The present build of *Metal Gear* takes into account all of PlayStation's capabilities, but it's not definitive yet and will improve. The textures [in the final game] will be nicer, for example.

NG: How do you create the animation?

HK: We didn't use any motion capture techniques. We succeeded in creating humanlike movements manually without it. Usually by designing the movements this way they always seem a little bit "too much." But we wanted the motion to be stylized, to be like an animated movie. So for the animation we used an anime specialist. He designed the movement by hand based on his experience. In the game, when there is an explosion, it's not the same as in reality. But it's the same for movies — they use cables and stunt men. We wanted an "entertainment-like" reality, not total realism.

The programmer and designer, like the staff, are young. They didn't have lots of experience making games. But because they didn't have much experience, they didn't say at the beginning

that things had to be done in a certain way. For example, when they had to design a building, they started with the basics. They did unconventional things that professionals usually don't do. In fact, their lack of experience made them go in a good, different direction to create this stylized "reality." We also had an open-minded programmer who was willing to sacrifice some processing power to keep some good-looking effects.

NG: What is *Metal Gear*'s closest competition?

HK: People seem to believe *Biohazard* [Resident Evil] is similar to *Metal Gear*. Considering the market, it may be true that the games are rivals. But I don't think the games are similar.

NG: Is *Goldeneye* a rival?

HK: It's a good game, but I'm not worried about it at all, since it's for a different game system. Considering the way the game will play, I think *Metal Gear* is closer to *Zelda 64* than to *Goldeneye*.

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Formerly known as
Bloodhouse,
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Shot

Housemarque pushes the 3D accelerator envelope, with a shooter designed to exploit the graphic power of Voodoo²

When a developer wants to show off new hardware, a shooter is usually the result. Typically gameplay doesn't require too much tweaking, and the team can spend more time wowing players with the latest graphical eye candy. Both *Out of the Void* (NG 31) and *Raider* (NG 34) displayed the remarkable effects possible with 3Dfx's first boards. But developer Housemarque is ramping up to support 3Dfx's next chipset — Voodoo² — and the 18-person company is already showing off its burgeoning graphic power in a game called *Shot*.

Housemarque, Finland's first game developer, originally began as Bloodhouse, which released a shooter called *Stardust* for the Amiga in 1993. *Shot* is the latest in the company's string of arcade-style shooters, yet this one presents an interesting plot twist: "You



are an alien, fighting against humans," says Creative Director Harn Tikkanen. "It opened seemingly endless amounts of new ideas, and felt novel and very functional for a game."

Housemarque intends to bring forth an epic story about several colossal UFOs that have crashed on Earth, each of them containing thousands of alien colonists and large amounts of high-tech apparatus. Unfortunately (or fortunately), the invasion has failed and withdrawal begins. Enter the player, who, from a first-person perspective, serves as a gunner



Players have access to every mission from the global map

Format:	PC/PC DVD
Publisher:	TBD
Developer:	Housemarque
Release Date:	1999
Origin:	Finland



While they look prerendered, the backgrounds are drawn realtime with the kind of quality seen in FMV shooters

in an attack ship that must salvage alien technologies and alien lives. The other option for players is to destroy these aliens before they are captured by



With an MMX Pentium and a Voodoo2 videocard, graphics like these become reality, running between 20 and 30fps (or 40-60 on Pentium III)

humans. But unlike G.Police or Wing Commander, an AI pilot handles most of the flying, and the player is responsible for gunning. The game isn't a Starblade-style, rail-based shooter, either, though.

"The player has control over the route the pilot takes," says Project Manager and Senior Programmer Jani Penttinen. "There are enemies everywhere, and the player is more than busy. Adding direct access to the ship's movement would make the game pretty complex to play. We want to make the controls easy and mastering the game hard." The result is similar to the classic Star Wars arcade game, in which an AI-guided ship gave the player limited control within the confines of the X-Wing's plotted path.

But *Star* promises to do more than add multiple routes. "In critical missions," says Penttinen, "the pilot actually leaves the ship to pick up something from the ground, and the player is responsible for protecting him. If the pilot dies, life gets a whole lot harder. If the player manages to survive on his own for a while, a new pilot will be beamed down from the alien mother ship, and he will be able to continue the mission."

Another interesting gameplay concept comes in the form of "time stretching." When the action gets too heavy, players can overclock their alien brain, stretching time to enhance their reactions. "Unfortunately," says Penttinen, "we don't have real access to players' brains, so we've had to



Production sketches illustrate an advanced human civilization



Your ship's targeting computer can single out specific enemies. In this case, the group leader

implement it so that the actual game time slows down. Everything moves slower except for the player's controls, which makes it easier to aim at the targets. Overclocking eats life energy, so the player has to carefully use it."

Aware that the linear nature of shooters detracts from replayability, Housemarque plans to open up all levels from the beginning in the form of a global map. "The resistance in target locations increases with time," says Penttinen. "The longer the player waits before playing a certain location, the higher the enemy count and technology level."

Penttinen stresses, though, that "the easiest path isn't always wisest," as human resistance grows in areas that are already harder than the one players are currently in. However, players are rewarded with better equipment after successful missions, and ultimately they must balance their progression to obtain the requisite firepower for killing advanced enemies. And resistance will not only increase in number, but the enemy will develop strategies customized to counter a player's attack pattern. Penttinen calls it "a hierarchical dual AI system," in which one system reads players' reactions and tries to learn their tactics while the other system uses this information when implementing enemy behaviors.

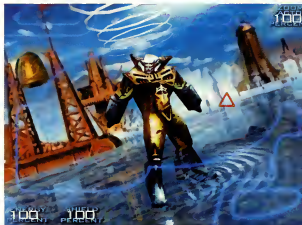
Yet what really sets the game apart are the visuals, as one look at the screenshots indicates. Each level delivers what *Next Generation* has been wanting all along — prerendered-quality

visuals in real time, which Housemarque has dubbed "PhotoSurreal technology."

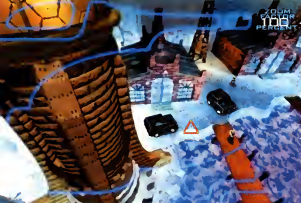
"When we designed the engine," says Senior Programmer Rene Kivioja, "we wanted it to be able to handle scenes consisting of millions of textured and shaded polygons. This was not possible with traditional methods, such as BSP [Binary Space Partitioning], so we had to take a new kind of approach. A part of what we ended up with is a mesh-compressing algorithm with real-time, detail-level control, which is achieved with a genetic algorithm. The end result is an engine with visual capacity never seen before."



Giant tentacles tend to be more menacing than the small schools of fish



The effect this boss has on water is a result of the Real Physics engine



The team is still tweaking the engine, though, and Kivioja stresses new features are constantly being added, such as depth of field/auto focus and realtime motion blur. While the level of detail in the scenery is unmatched, the average polygon count for enemies, 500 to 600, isn't much higher than what's being achieved now with the first Voodoo chipset. Kivioja notes that the artists have been instrumental in creating great models with low poly counts so that many models can be displayed at the same time.

As for the audio, the sound tools, collectively called MIDAS, have enabled the team to allocate an unlimited number of sound channels. Doppler effects enhanced with 3D sound algorithms, and post-processing effects like echoes. Plus, there will be more than 70 minutes of music that will be orchestral in nature.

According to Penttinen, *Shot* probably won't ship until 1999, which gives competing developers a year to catch up to the caliber of graphics. Aside

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Environments, like this desert canyon, have an almost limitless depth of view while maintaining a constant frame rate

from supporting Voodoo2, the game is being designed to run on any 3D card, and there seems to be a lack of urgency in getting the game out the door, which denotes a dedication to gameplay. Says Penttinen, "There are no rules of how to make a game addictive and enjoyable to play. It is always a matter of trying out different ways of implementing things and lots of play testing ... [but] we want the game to be absolutely perfect, and we will polish it until this goal is reached."

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Advanced lighting and particle explosions are very impressive



High Heat Baseball



A baseball game created by baseball fanatics for other baseball fanatics, *High Heat* has a depth of play few can match

Team .366 (named after Ty Cobb's career batting average, the highest ever) is a new developer/publishing division within 3DO, and *High Heat Baseball*, due for release right around the start of the '98 baseball season, is proof the team's in it for the long haul. Well over two years in development, *High Heat* remains what it has always been: a baseball game for hardcore baseball fanatics.

Discussing his team and its goals, Team .366's Creative Director Mark Dickenson explains, "The reason they're working on the product is they really wanted to make a better baseball game — more playable, more real. Specifically, we wanted to concentrate on what goes on between the batter and the pitcher, making sure that was really re-creating the pitch-by-pitch matchup of baseball. I think that every pitch is really a game by itself — any given pitch can be the strikeout or the home run."

To this end, *High Heat* is not visually flashy (at least at this stage in the series' life cycle — more on this later), concentrating

With baseball season just around the corner, a group of dedicated ball fanatics is set to release one of the most realistic baseball games yet



instead on being clean and eminently playable. "I was really disappointed by a lot of the games that I played, where the AI and logic just didn't make sense," Dickenson says. "For example, in most games, if you're batting and you've got an 0-2 count, there's a 50-50 chance the pitcher's going to come right down the middle, and that just doesn't happen in real baseball. Even Greg Maddux,



Format: **PC/PlayStation**

Publisher: **Team .366**

Developer: **Team .366**

Release Date: **April 1998**

Origin: **U.S.**



The pitcher/batter matchup is central to the game's mechanics — the designers at 3DO are striving to make it as realistic as possible

who's the man of men, wouldn't go, I'm so good. I'm ahead of this guy, let's just rub one in his face."

By all accounts a pet project of 3DO founder Trip Hawkins, who's a rabid fan of the sport, *High Heat* began as a title for 3DO's Opera system. When that died, it was rewritten for M2, a move that benefited the title immensely, since the increased horsepower enabled the development team to expand its statistical game engine. Of course, now that M2 hasn't gone anywhere either, the game is being optimized for PC and, at some future point, PlayStation. And while graphics are not the emphasis, the prerendered, sprite-based players are still set in fully 3D stadiums, and in its final release, the game will support Direct3D and 3Dfx Glide.




And, of course, like every good baseball game, *High Heat* reproduces all the MLB stadiums in all their glory

In a scheme similar to that found in Sega's *World Series Baseball*, gamers select from among a given pitcher's arsenal of throws — based, of course, on pitches that that player uses in real life. Using the D-pad, players choose to throw either a strike or a ball. The throw can then be further affected by holding a direction on the D-pad during the pitch. A pitcher's actual performance stats also come into play by taking into account things like how well he throws at the beginning of a game as opposed to later, how often he's known to use a given type of pitch, and even how well he fares against right-handed or left-handed batters. The batters, for their part, can use the exact same D-pad layout before the pitch to "guess" what type of throw is coming; they can also use the D-pad during the swing to further aim for the ball.

The developers' commitment to realism does not, however, extend to one area of the sport: its pace. Dickenson explains, "Most of the baseball games that are on the market just take too long. Nine-inning games can take anywhere from 50 minutes to over an hour, and we wanted something where someone with basically half an hour could sit down and get through a game and still have all the reality — three hours of baseball action distilled into 30 minutes. And when we talk about that, people go, 'Well don't baseball fans want an accurate simulation?' And we go, 'Yeah, we're obsessed with it, but we don't think you have to bog the game down to get to the realism of the simulation.'" So *High Heat* does things like cut away the moment it becomes clear a foul tip is going into the stands, for example, and returns the ball to the pitcher as soon as a strike or ball is made.

Yet *High Heat Baseball* should be more accurately thought of as *High Heat '98*, the first iteration of a series that will evolve over time. "High Heat Baseball, to us, isn't just this one product," Dickenson says. "It's something we're dedicated to as a company and as individuals. We're driven a lot by what we're doing now to think of what we're going to do next time." Already plans are in the works for switching to fully polygonal players for next year.

Which shouldn't imply that this version is somehow unfinished. In fact, Dickenson has a clear goal in mind for *High Heat*. "For the last rev I play before it goes on the shelf," he says, "I want to be able to say that no one here was standing around looking at it going, 'That wouldn't happen in a real baseball game.'" 



The designers intend to continue refining the game for years to come

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Crisis City

Takara plans to enter the 3D adventure market with both guns drawn



It takes two to tango, and two players may be necessary considering the time limit imposed on each section of the game

After beating its hit franchise, *Battle Arena Toshinden*, into the ground, Takara finally comes back with an original game. The question is, can *Crisis City* stretch beyond the shadows of *Overblood* and *Resident Evil*?

Alone in the Dark may have introduced the third-person 3D action/adventure, but much has changed since. The game model has evolved so that developers are now in a position to create more complex stories and produce Hollywood-style effects. According to Takara, the feel of *Crisis City* will come from a mix of films like *Terminator*, *Desperado*, *Lethal Weapon*, and *La Femme Nikita*. Bringing the feel of this eclectic group of films to a game will be a daunting task, and one that should entail plenty of shooting action. But considering the detailed environments, sharp prerendered backgrounds, and lighting effects, this is one task Takara has been preparing for.

Of course, it all comes back to the gameplay. Players will have the usual assortment of weapons (handguns and machine guns). There will also be a lock-on targeting system to help players aim their weapons in the 3D environment, an absolute necessity as two players can take part in the adventure at the same time.



Players can expect to choose from at least two characters

Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	TBA
Developer:	Takara
Release Date:	TBA
Origin:	Japan

And to add to the replay value, the company plans to include a versus mode.

Takara will have to make great strides to compete with *Resident Evil 2* and *Metal Gear Solid*. Yet, with an action film atmosphere and a two-player mode in a game dominated by solitary play, *Crisis City* may bring something new to the table.

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Takara is following the trend in third-person games, whereby traditional bad guys are combined with impressive explosions

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Kase no Monogatari

In 1997, Ascii released a horse-racing game called *Derby Stallion* for PlayStation. The rumor is that in Japan, *Derby Stallion* sold at least as well as *Final Fantasy VII*. While it seems incredible that a horse-racing game could have sold as many as 3.6 million units, sales figures like these certainly can imbue a sense of invincibility within a company. Perhaps that's why Ascii is now going after Square's

Proof that in Japan you can make an RPG out of anything, Ascii builds its latest role-player on a radio program

Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	TBA
Developer:	Ascii
Release Date:	Q1 1998
Origin:	Japan



The world of *Kase no Monogatari* is teeming with life in real time, giving players the kind of seamless interaction rarely seen in RPGs

strangehold on the very competitive Japanese RPG market with *Kase no Monogatari*, or *Legend of Mars*.

Based on a popular Japanese radio program of the same name, the game features a fantasy storyline — little else is known. The visuals, however, are reminiscent of *FFVII*, with doe-eyed characters exploring richly designed mystical settings. Unlike Square's

masterpiece, the battle and adventure phases will take place consistently in the same realtime polygonal environment — something rarely seen in current RPGs.

With a cohesive look, even in the early graphics, and a fan base in the wings, the game has a chance to come out on top — that is, in Japan. If Ascii intends to bring the title to the West, it may run into some problems. Namely, *FFVII*'s success may be no more than a marketing-driven anomaly — there's no real indication that U.S. gamers are sold on RPGs, and the company's chance to ride *FFVII*'s coattails may have already passed. Still, the argument can be made that a good RPG will draw its own crowd. As of press time, the U.S. division had made no decision as to whether it would release the game Stateside.

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Like most Japanese RPGs, characters have a definite anime influence

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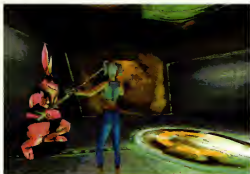
ng alphas



Space Bunnies

Must Die

Camp sci-fi meets third-person adventure, complete with the latest heroine. Can Jinx forge room for one more at Lara's table?



Allison's arsenal includes two guns and nine different kinds of alien ammo. Survival depends on augmenting one's firepower

Format:	PC
Publisher:	Ripcord Games
Developer:	Jinx
Release Date:	Q2 1998
Origin:	U.S.

When the developers at Jinx looked at *Tomb Raider*, they knew they were in trouble. "Even though in our hearts we knew we didn't copy [*Tomb Raider*]," says Jinx CEO Vinny Carrella, "the world was going to compare us to that game."

Carrella is right. *Space Bunnies Must Die* is a 3D, third-person adventure featuring a svelte female protagonist — coincidental? Stopitrics may argue, but the game was in development before *Tomb Raider* began building buzz in Los Angeles during E3 of 1996. It certainly has taken the team some time to bring *Space Bunnies* to the roughly playable condition it was in when *Next Generation* visited Jinx's San Francisco-based office. But Carrella, a co-founder of Drew Pictures and one of the minds behind *Iron Heist* and *Bad Mojo*, isn't about making "wannabe" titles. "We added humorous elements," says Carrella, "added more characters, stronger characters, stronger backstory; and I think we added much better gameplay, much better interactivity."

Strong words, but Carrella explains that there are plenty of machines and objects to interact with. He also sees the nonplayer characters as more than just things to shoot and kill from far away. "You get to use certain characters as tools to help advance gameplay," Carrella



Each of Allison's nine outfits (some with shades) protects her from a different hazard — ironic, considering the revealing nature of a few

says. "With certain mutants, you can ride on their backs. With the mutant vulture, you can grab his feet and use him to fly to different parts of the level. There's a mutant frog, which you can pick up and use as a grappling hook."

This may sound bizarre, even in a medium where the bizarre is expected. But then again, it seems everything about the game is that way. Take the story: As the rodeo star Allison, the player must infiltrate Bunny Mountain, a dormant volcano hiding the lair of the Space



Jinx artist Aaron Malmshamer sculpted this superb model used for character animation



From this cavernous central hub, the player launches to the game's 10 levels. It also plays a key role in a puzzle

Bunnies, and foil their plot for world domination. At the same time, players are trying to rescue their twin sister, a country-western singer kidnapped by the Space Bunnies, who are quite enamored with country music and are using her for entertainment.

As camp as it sounds, the odd stylings of the game have given way to some interesting innovations. For instance, Allison's sister Jocelyn has left CDs as clues throughout the levels, and players can use these in some interesting ways. "You're going through this dark, foreboding environment, and there are saw blades coming at you," says Carrella, "and suddenly it kicks this Loretta Lynn-like song, and it plays for 20 seconds. The songs subdue the mutant animals, allowing you to use the mutants as tools."

These odd permutations are hardly the kind of thing associated with Core's flagship beauty, and it is this over-the-top style the Jinx team is most happy exploiting. "She's a country bumpkin," Carrella says of Allison's character, "kinda white trash."

Nor is she afraid to express herself. As Allison can undergo a possible total of nine wardrobe changes throughout the game, her comments are often directed at the fairly revealing nature of some of her costumes. "She toys with the player," says Jinx President and Project Leader Phil Simon. "She breaks the third plane and says things like, 'Hope you're getting off on that back there.'"

Allison's not the only one with a sense of humor. The entire cast of bunnies, while dangerous, provides a wide array of comic appeal. The malevolent hares range from stealthy

snipers to kamikaze rabbits hopping headlong with large canisters of TNT.

Of the game's 10 levels, only the first and last are linear. The levels are fairly large and must be revisited more than once. "You never will find all the things you need to accomplish a level on that level," says Simon.

To ease much of the backtracking, though, players can power up teleporters to warp them through areas. However, they'll need to find the proper fuel within the level to get them running. Enemies will also respawn, but there is a way of keeping this from happening. "There's this emitter room in these levels," says Carrella, "where their machinery for regenerating these bunnies is found. If you can make your way into this area and destroy the machines, it won't reinstate bunnies."



Zombies, or humans that have been mutated by the Space Bunnies, take on a B-movie look and move with the same comic strangeness



These sketches reveal the twisted nature of the evil Space Bunny entity

ng alphas



From scaling rock walls to jumping and climbing, Allison can do almost everything Lara can, and then some things Lara can't. Her unique moves range from simple hand-over-hand climbing to skillful navigation

Not only are the levels expansive, but they are also attractive; some are even brightly lit with colored lighting. To get a moody effect, the environments have been mapped with a radiosity renderer and then lit to mimic prerendered light sources. This is also how the team achieved lighting on the character.

Space Bunies is being built with a set of tools collectively called Digi. The tools were developed by Pulse Entertainment, whose recent merger with

7th Level to build Internet tools, fired the team to break out and form Jinx. It is the first time the Digi tools have been tested in game development, and while the developers at Jinx are now comfortable with the tools, getting them up to speed was a painstaking process. Simon believes a minimum of a P166 will be required, and at that speed, hardware acceleration may be necessary as well. The team is using Direct3D and has plans to support the Voodoo2 chipset.

Oddly, as much as the Jinx team stresses how much it's trying to differentiate the game from Tomb Raider, members still make many comparisons. This may be due to the team's self-imposed pressure to top one of '97's best-sellers, or it might be that Tomb Raider is really the only quality third-person PC adventure game out there to compare it to. Regardless, Space Bunies already does plenty of its own thing, and with some polish, should be enough to stand its ground in what will be undoubtedly a crowded third-person market in 1998.

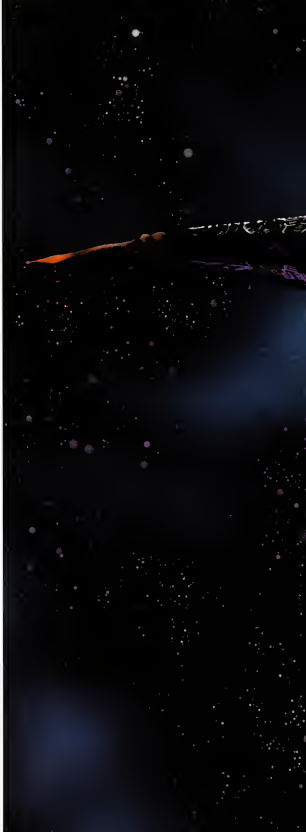


Allison's guns auto-target, important when attacked by bear-bunnies

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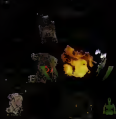
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Brunswick Circuit Pro Bowling

The creators of *Ten Pin Alley* strike again, this time with an official endorsement and an emphasis on realism

Format:	PC/PlayStation
Publisher:	THQ
Developer:	Adrenalin
Release Date:	Q3 1998
Origin:	U.S.

Historically, bowling games have never sold very well on console systems, a wonder considering that more than 50 million Americans bowl. But that changed last year when *Ten Pin Alley*'s realistic physics engine and engaging gameplay made it a surprise hit. Now Adrenalin ups the ante with an official endorsement by the Brunswick Corporation, an improved physics engine, and a complete graphics overhaul.

It's surprising it has taken this long for the development community to provide games with the sim elements in Brunswick. (How long have golf sims been in existence?) The game capitalizes on the Brunswick license, enabling



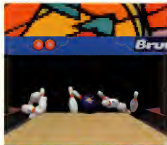
Professional bowling lanes come complete with audience and prizes

players to choose from 11 professional bowlers, and the gameplay will adhere to official tournament rules. The game will include tournament and career modes, a create-your-own-bowler feature, an open play mode, and a more forgiving difficulty setting for casual bowlers.

"We wanted the pin totals to be more realistic," says Jon Osbourne, THQ's producer, "so we made the game a little easier."

The PlayStation version will support up to six players, while the PC game will support up to 32 via the Internet. And to bring the hominess of the sport, well, home, Cosmic Bowling has been included. The popular bowling franchise illuminates the interior of the alley with blacklights, complete with glowing bowling balls and pins and a backdrop of funky music.

With no competition in the near future, Adrenalin can rest assured knowing that it has carved its place in a niche market. Its emphasis on fun while bringing elements of realism to the game almost ensures its position as the first company to produce a successful string of bowling games. As for THQ, Brunswick should help keep the company on pace for its 13th consecutive successful quarter.



Brunswick has skins mode in open play (top) and incredible pin physics (above)

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Harley Davidson & LA Riders



Driving through a populated airfield is just one of the many things that reinforces the game's "go anywhere" design.

Model 3 motorcycle racer *Harley Davidson & LA Riders* was introduced during the last Sega Private show. Developed by Sega's AM R&D 1, the game features street-track motorcycle racing clearly influenced by Atari's *San Francisco Rush*. First and freewheeling, the game covers a lot of territory—including familiar L.A. downtown and highway scenes. There will also be the expected shortcuts through buildings, parks, and similar off-road locales. When driving through the city, players will have to contend with real traffic and try to avoid running down pedestrians.

Players can choose one of five Harley



Cornering is tighter when you lean into a turn, just like on a real Harley.

Sega hits the pavement with a license that is as much a part of America as apple pie.

Format:	Arcade
Publisher:	Sega
Developer:	Sega AM1
Release Date:	December 1998
Origin:	Japan



As in *Super GT*, players have selectable first- and third-person views.

Davidson bikes, from a 1948 Panhead to a Police Cruiser. Two cabinets were displayed at the show—a deluxe cabinet featuring a system similar to *Marx TT* and one featuring a full Harley Davidson mock-up. The game should also be available in a twin cabinet. *LA Riders* provides players with a fine degree of control over the bike, and the graphics are as crisp and realistic as one would expect from the Model 3 board.

With *Ski Champ* already showing off AM1's abilities, *Harley Davidson & LA Riders* may signal another Sega AM department's reach for arcade dominance. With Sega needing as many arcade conversions as possible while it reads *Katana*, this can only be a good thing.

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The classic Harley Davidson mock-up adds to the realism.

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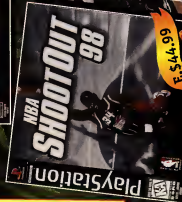
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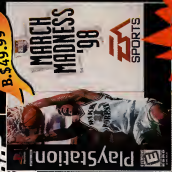
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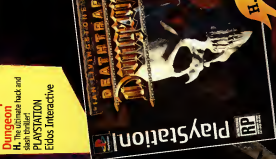
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Urban Assault

War is hell, and some kinds of war are more hell than others. Microsoft's entry in the realtime strategy/first-person sim hybrid has more bad guys than we'd thought possible



Urban Assault's totally grungy aesthetic sensibility is a far cry from C&C's comparatively quiet, green landscapes



This is one of those games that makes utter devastation look cool

Developed in Potsdam, Germany, Urban Assault presents a rather dark view of the future, in which the Earth is not only a toxic, radioactive, barely habitable wasteland, but is also being fought over by two (count 'em, two) hostile alien species, the Mykonians and the Sulgogans.

To make matters worse, the few remaining humans are divided up into three equally hostile factions — the tech-heavy, aggressive Tackasts; the retrofitted, aggressive Tackasts; and oh, the good guys, the Resistance, who have hacked together a worldwide computer network and grafted a lone human into it. From this "Host Station," robot armies are sent out to battle the different factions and try to save what's left of mankind.

This central conceit is how the player fits in. A control station is teleported into a territory, and by drawing energy from the Earth's core, it begins building units and ordering them into battle. Combat takes place across a fully 3D landscape but can also be manipulated from an overhead map, and the player can take direct control and pilot any of the 15 available units at any time. Enemy factions use vastly different unit types, from tanks to blimps,

Format:	PC
Publisher:	Microsoft
Developer:	Terratools
Release Date:	Summer 1998
Origin:	Germany

and the game features 50 units overall.)

The interface appears complex, yet intuitive, as different map and option screens can be called up with a click of the mouse, popping up as a series of transparent overlays. A smarter brand of pathfinding AI is also promised, so independent units can act with intelligent autonomy when needed.

Urban Assault benefits from a number of other features, not the least of which is its unique, gritty design — dark and very Euro-trashy. The final product will support Direct3D (of course), force-feedback joysticks, and a number of multiplayer options including Internet play via Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone.

First there was *Uprising*, next we should see *Battlezone*, now comes *Urban Assault*. All three combine smilie action with realtime strategy. Synchronicity, or following up on the next big thing? You decide.



Vehicles on the field can be controlled directly or simply given orders



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The way games ought to be...

In search of the future of gameplay

Technology at its worst

Of the 10 great videogame failures brought forth for your delight this month (see page 38), five have something particular in common: *LodeStar: The Legend of Tully Bodine*, *Rise of the Robots*, *Microcosm*, *TooStruck*, and *Shaq Fu* are all games that, whether by accident or design, were standard bearers for some kind of new technology. Both *Rocket Science's LodeStar* and *Psygnosis' Microcosm* rode in on the coattails of CD-ROM. *Acclaim's Rise of the Robots* was the world's first game to boast playable "rendered" graphics. Virgin's *TooStruck* was the product of a huge investment in state-of-the-art audio and video processing equipment. *Shaq Fu* featured "rotoscoped" animation of the big man himself. Each served as a lightning rod for the excitement that was generated by the introduction of a new technology to the gaming field. Each found itself thrust, willingly or not, into the media's spotlight as a game that promised to show us a new way forward.

That all five games relied on a technological innovation for their "hook," that all five games were accompanied by such inordinate prelaunch hype, and that four of the five games so spectacularly failed to deliver a rewarding gaming experience is surely no coincidence. In fact, it's easy to see a pattern. It seems that whenever a new technology reaches the world of videogames, the entire industry gets far too excited, drops what it was doing before, and naively pins all of its hopes on this new technology's ability to "revolutionize" the gaming experience.

Why is this? And why does it never work out as planned?

There are a handful of reasons why it's easy for us gamers to get overexcited by new technology. First, there is a seemingly infinite number of marketing executives whose job it is to do nothing but dream up "fresh angles" with which to make a game stand out from the crowd. In the absence of any gameplay innovation, an appealing technological novelty can make the difference between fame and obscurity — at least until the game is launched. Sega's "blast processing," EA's "v-polygons," and EA's "liquid AI" — all were meaningless terms, dreamed up by someone in a sharp suit

and greased-back hair, designed to tickle our appetite for new technology. Videogames aren't the only victims of this syndrome — think back a couple of years to when all kinds of companies jumped on the "information superhighway" bandwagon (each one claiming credit for something that doesn't even exist yet). Or check out Dodge's new TV commercials for trucks utilizing "Cyber Synthesis™" (whatever the hell that might be). The point is that the promise of new technology is a recognized and established way of grabbing people's attention. No matter that the technology offers only a glimmer of potential — a skilled marketing campaign can fan the smallest of flames into a roaring fire.

A second reason to be overexcited by new technology is that, very often, technology does indeed deliver significant advances in gaming — it just seldom happens overnight. Just as it takes several generations of software until a

The first-out-of-the-gate, "new technology, new game" titles show others how not to do it

console shows what it's truly capable of (witness the continual improvement of PlayStation games), any new technology needs time to find its feet. CD-ROM technology has indeed revolutionized an element of gaming (neither *Final Fantasy VII*, *Wing Commander 3*, or *Wipeout* could have been delivered on any other format). But inevitably it takes a good amount of experimentation and learning from other people's mistakes until someone gets it right. The overhyped, first-out-of-the-gate, "new technology, new game" titles simply show others how not to do it.

But the third and most worrying reason why we fall for the lure of technological gizmos and novelties is that we forget the importance of gameplay. I know I sometimes sound like a broken record, but I don't think that the importance of gameplay can be stressed enough. Gameplay is the glue that binds all the other game elements — graphics, story, music — together. Without it, we would have nothing (or, at least, merely Digital Pictures titles). But once again, because it is invisible and because

by Neil West

Neil West is
Next Generation's
editor-at-large



it can't be adequately described using words — basically, because "you have to play it to understand it" — gameplay often gets forgotten.

Usually, the new technology being celebrated as a "revolution" for videogaming simply is a way of making computer graphics more realistic. Aside from the fact (as pointed out by Shigeru Miyamoto in *NG 38*) that more realistic graphics aren't automatically better graphics, it's worthwhile to remind ourselves what graphics do. Graphics represent the game on a TV screen — they are not the game itself. As Sid Meier says, a game really takes place in a player's head, and what makes the difference between a good game and a bad game is how believable and entertaining this imaginary game world is. Once a player "gets into" a game, the graphics on the screen become largely irrelevant. Otherwise, how would any of us have ever enjoyed playing *Space Invaders* or *Pac-Man*?

Some food for thought:

When CDs replaced vinyl, musical recordings sounded sharper but the actual songs didn't get any better.

The Denver Broncos beating the Green Bay Packers in the Superbowl was a great sporting occasion, regardless of whether you watched it on a black-and-white portable or a big-screen color TV.

I defy anybody to tell me that *Starship Troopers* is a better movie than *Star Wars*.

Sure, new technology can bring plenty of benefit to the videogame world. CD-ROMs, force-feedback joysticks, online multiplayer gaming, 3Dfx — all have brought a lot to the party. And sure, without technology there wouldn't be a game industry to begin with. But my message here is to remember that technology should serve the gameplay — and not the other way around.

ng

Want to Respond?

Send your thoughts and comments to TheWay@magnummedia.com. We will run a section of reader Q&A in an upcoming issue.



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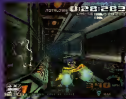


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Snowboard Kids Nintendo 64 **Gran Turismo** PlayStation **Shining Force III** Saturn **Wing Commander**
Prophecy PC **Netstorm** Online **Einhander** PlayStation **Grandia** Saturn **Red Baron II** PC **Tanarus** Online

finals

Reviews that stand on the shore of the ocean of enlightenment

96 Nintendo 64

96 PlayStation

100 Saturn

104 PC

109 Online

Next Generation's star ratings are meant as a quick indicator of how our reviewers feel about a particular game. However, the reasoning behind why a game was rated that way is every bit as important, so please read the full text, then feel free to agree or disagree. Besides, what good is writing a review if nobody reads it?

★★★★★ **Revolutionary**
 Brilliantly conceived and flawlessly executed, a new high watermark.

★★★★ **Excellent**
 A high-quality and inventive new game. Either a step forward for an existing genre or a successful attempt at creating a new one.

★★★ **Good**
 A solid and competitive example of an established game style.

★★ **Average**
 Perhaps competent — certainly uninspired.

★ **Bad**
 Crucially flawed in design or application.

Describes a review appearing on the **Next Generation** Disc.

Describes a review of a Japanese product.

Nintendo 64

Snowboard Kids

Publisher: **Athas Software**
 Developer: **Racdyn**

Yet another racing title for Nintendo 64, *Snowboard Kids*' main point of distinction is its snowboarding theme. Considering the popularity of the sport, this was probably a wise marketing move, but interestingly, the gameplay resembles the likes of *Mario Kart 64* and *Diddy Kong Racing* more than it does simulation-type snowboarding titles like *Cool Boarders*, *Steep Slope Sliders*, or Nintendo's forthcoming 1998 *Snowboarding*.

Gameplay consists of racing down one of six tracks on snowboards against three computer (or in multiplayer mode, human) opponents. Players pick up power-ups along the way in order to attack and impede the progress of their opponents or to enhance the performance of their own snowboard. There's nice variety to the weapons, which adds some balanced strategy overtones to the gameplay. Yet, despite the game's snowboarding pretensions,



Snowboard Kids doesn't offer much that's new, but what the game does do, it does right

the gameplay is ultimately a takeoff of *Mario Kart*. The extent of *Snowboard Kids*' innovation is probably the feature in which players must muscle for position at the ski lift in order to get back to the top of the mountain for another "lap."

Although numerically few, the tracks in the game are well-designed and occasionally offer alternate pathways that allow players to gain an advantage: the trade-off is that the difficulty increases. Curiously, the latter tracks in

the game don't necessarily even feature snow, so it's evident that arcade liberties were taken with the game concept. When a player performs well, the game reveals some hidden secrets (i.e., extra tracks), and there are Time, Shooting, and Tricks modes to enhance the overall replay value.

Snowboard Kids' technical performance is typical N64 fare in that the game features a cute, cartoonlike look that allows the game to run at a superior frame rate, although the all-too-familiar collection of N64 textures still exists. The nicest aspect of *Snowboard Kids* may actually be the control — while simplistic, it nicely communicates the sensation of piloting a snowboard through the analog stick of the controller.

In the final analysis, *Snowboard Kids* is an entertaining title that, despite its lack of originality, does most things right. Considering the infrequency of truly compelling N64 titles, gamers could do worse than spending some time on the slopes with *Snowboard Kids*.

Rating: ★★★

PlayStation

Einhander

Publisher: **SCEA**
 Developer: **Square Soft**

When word got out that Square Soft intended to release a 3D shooter on PlayStation, there was some doubt it could be done. Last year's *Final Fantasy 3D* from Namco tried and failed. Let's face it, the shooting game died with 16-bit. But wait — now comes *Einhander*, and if any title can resurrect shooters in a polygon age, this is it.

Set in a futuristic world reminiscent of *Blade Runner*, players control a special attack vehicle called the *Einhander*. The 3D backgrounds — streamed directly from the disc — fly by so quickly there's practically no time to enjoy them. But that's the least of a player's worries. The gameplay is nonstop from beginning to end — the kind of white-knuckle action that used to be found only in arcades. Each boss has an original strategy to be mastered and will most likely test up the limited supply of continues before the perfect solution is found. Players don't have to be weaned on shooters to adapt



Square's Einhandler shows there might be a little life left in a dead genre after all

quickly to the controls, and maneuvering through the onslaught of enemies will be a baptism by fire. The only complaint is that sometimes, after losing a life, the game restarts in a location that offers little time to react.

Einhander makes no effort to be anything more than a traditional shooter, with the addition of 3D backgrounds and enemies, but waiting to see what's next is a rewarding experience, as any game should be. It's a welcome challenge for those gamers dying to play a good

shooter, and hopefully *Einhander* can inject some life into a moribund genre.

Rating: ★★★★★

Final Fantasy Tactics

Publisher: **SCEA**
 Developer: **Square Soft**

Following in the wake of the success that left *Final Fantasy VII* atop the U.S. charts, Square and Sony hope to repeat the performance with another chapter in the series and a game called *Final Fantasy Tactics*. This time around, the emphasis is on strategy. *FF Tactics* is based more on battlefield commands and stat checking than storytelling. But the game does feature an interesting backdrop of medieval political greed and class wars — the player assumes the role of a young aristocrat named Ramza, who continually stumbles upon the dire designs of not only his own noble family, but also those of the church and state.

But it's hardly an even balance between storyline and strategy, due to the large number of strangely identical-

Tour de force

Gran Turismo

Developer: SCEI

Publisher: SCEI

Gran Turismo is simply the most incredible racing game ever to grace a console system. Period. No detail was overlooked in the game's design, and it shines through in every facet of the game, no matter how you look at it.

As a racing simulation, Gran Turismo is unmatched. The controls are tight, and with an analog controller, they're the most realistic seen to date on console. The physics engine is dead-on, and once players get used to the nuances of driving cars at high speeds under true conditions, it's very intuitive.

Gran Turismo features two modes of play. The first is an arcade mode that allows players to just jump in and race. While the arcade mode is quite fun with its two-player, spin-screen features, the real depth of the game can be found in Gran Turismo mode. A car fanatic's dream, Gran Turismo mode gives players a set amount of cash to purchase a used car and then lets them loose on the racing circuit. In the course of the game, players must earn money to purchase newer, faster cars in order to progress through the ranking

Both car enthusiasts and racing fans alike have reason to celebrate with Sony's new racing simulation



Gran Turismo not only looks great (oh, whatta replay mode), but it's also one of the most intense racers out there

system. The game is so detailed it's even necessary to earn a driver's license before competing.

There are approximately 150 cars to choose from in Gran Turismo. Many of them can only be used after earning enough money in the Gran Turismo mode to purchase them. Each car can be fully customized with dozens of different parts in the garage, all of which affect performance in both obvious and subtle ways. To truly excel, players must spend many hours on the practice track, fine-tuning their cars for maximum performance.

The graphics in Gran Turismo are as revolutionary as the gameplay. While the in-game graphics are truly excellent and provide a real sense of "being there," the replay mode graphics are like nothing ever seen before on any system. Replays are viewed through a variety of dynamic camera angles similar to a television broadcast.

Just as in Motor Toon Gran Prix (the development team's last effort), there are also hidden modes, like a startlingly beautiful, high-res, 60fps mode that will make your mouth drop. Add in such incredible effects (in real time, no less) like environment mapping and specular highlighting, and the replay is easily mistaken as a real video. We're not kidding — it really is that good!

Sony plans to import the game to the U.S., probably by the time you read this. Rumor has it the game will lose about 60 cars, since the licenses will need to be renegotiated. Whether they will

be replaced or dropped isn't known, but if it's the former, then new 3D models will have to be created. How this might affect the graphics remains to be seen. What is known is that the U.S. version will run slightly faster.

However, as it stands in the Japanese version, everything about Gran Turismo is a class act, and it raises the bar for racing games on almost every possible level. Our highest possible recommendation.

Rating: ★★★★★



Every single piece of your car in Gran Turismo can be fine-tuned to a frightening degree

PlayStation

looking characters among the throng of constant governmental backstabbing. It's hard to keep track of exactly which characters are important and which are not, making it difficult to even care what happens to any of them. But then again, a strategy game doesn't aim for thrills through character development as much as it does on the battlefield. And *FF Tactics* keeps true to the promise of a richly detailed tactical game.

With a complex and complicated menu system detailing every single stat of every character in your party, the game has enough depth to keep players engrossed in gameplay. Featuring a complex system of "job acquisition," in which party members can learn new abilities and amazing powers by amassing specific points (besides the usual experience points) in battle, is a unique aspect of *FF Tactics* that makes combat a truly rewarding experience.

It's somewhat comforting, given the amount of time spent in battle "tweaking up" because the difficulty level of the game is set very high. It's typical to lose quite a few rounds before becoming familiar with the battle systems and the monstrous menus. The enemies can be brutal and precise, while the bosses are plain merciless. But once you get a handle on the mind-boggling menu screens and

plenty of variety.

One-player mode is fun, but even with the inclusion of an RPG mode in the home version, the game gets repetitive pretty quickly. The RPG mode simply consists of walking around an island in search of a magical gun. There are villagers to talk to and monsters to fight, but nothing that can even be considered slightly cerebral. Combat is, you guessed it, the shooting galleries from the normal game. It's almost surreal when clay pigeons catch you and challenge you to fight, not to mention their screams of agony when you win. It's nice to know that Namco wants to add value to the overall package, but it seems a bit forced, and players will tire of it well before they're finished.

But where the game shines is in its competitive two-player mode. For those blessed with two Guncons, *Point Blank* becomes a top-notch party game. Unlike other shooting games, which rely on rote memorization of enemy placement for success, *Point Blank* is just a pure test of shooting skill. This puts both players on fairly even ground at the start of each match and ensures a fair competition—something most other gun games don't do. Due to the random nature of the game, every time it's played, there's at least a slightly different set of challenges.



Ultimately unsatisfying, *Skullmonkeys* seems more of a misunderstood art project than a product of gross negligence

firsthand knowledge of games. The result was a slightly off-center graphic adventure called *The Neverhood* that went on to please quite a few and bore a number of others. This time around, though, TenHapel has brought the eccentric characters from *The Neverhood* to PlayStation in the form of a 2D platformer.

Packed with more than 100 levels sporting some of the most dazzling and unique-looking environments and characters ever seen in a PlayStation game, *Skullmonkeys* puts the player in charge of Klaymen again, as he attempts to foil his nemesis Klogg and his evil plot for world domination. Featuring quite traditional means of doing away with enemies (i.e., jamming on their heads), as well as a few less conventional weapons (Hammer Shield, Universe Enema, etc.), the game is a throwback to days of much simpler gameplay. The claymation creatures and characters and pre-rendered backdrops are beautiful, and the game features an uncanny pop-culture wit, but that doesn't translate into great gameplay.

As a concept, *Skullmonkeys* works. But in practice, the idea has been squeezed into a monotonous series of simplistic levels that drone on and on with little variation between them. Enemies not only fail to offer much of a real challenge, but they seem to have been plopped into each stage as more of a distraction from the backgrounds than anything else. If this started out as either a nostalgic tribute to great 2D platformers of old or as a parody of clichéd gameplay conventions, it fails on both accounts, simply because the game hasn't been constructed solidly enough to keep the game's attention in order to prove either point. Which is a real

shame, since *Skullmonkeys* contains some of the best audio and graphics for any platformer on PlayStation. Sadly, somewhere between concept and completion, this project went wrong.

Rating: ★★

X-Men: Children of the Atom

Publisher: Acclaim
Developer: Probe

Almost two years after its intended release date, *X-Men: Children of the Atom* has finally shipped for PlayStation. The real question is, this late in the day, does anybody care anymore?

X-Men was the first Capcom game to use the 2D fighting engine most recently seen in *Marvel Super Heroes* and *X-Men Vs. Street Fighter*. In addition to playing all of your favorite X-Men comic characters, *X-Men: COA* adds super jump, chain combos, the ability to hit opponents that are knocked down, and an X-powered super move to the familiar Capcom 2D fighting system. Not a whole lot extra, but for a Capcom title, these



The larger characters in *X-Men* look great—at least in static screenshots



The real strength of *FF Tactics* lies in the options available to your character in menus and stats

become accustomed to the steep learning curve in combat, *FF Tactics* does provide more than enough rewards for a job well done. Those looking for a tough, uncompromising challenge on the battlefield—but high on playability while the graphics are strictly sprite-based, they're at least crisp and colorful, and there's

Rating: ★★

Point Blank

Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco

Point Blank is a gun game in its purest form. Consisting of 2D or 3D different shooting galleries, *Point Blank* is light on gimmicks but high on playability while the graphics are strictly sprite-based, they're at least crisp and colorful, and there's



Point Blank has different types of shooting galleries to make every game's selection unique

This gives the loser of each match an excuse to play again and adds a lot to the replay value.

Overall, *Point Blank* is in no way perfect for a single player, but people looking for a two-player gun game will not be disappointed.

Rating: ★★

Skullmonkeys

Publisher: EA
Developer: Neverhood/LucasArts

With the success of *Earthworm Jim* under his belt, Doug TenHapel, the creative force behind the game, went on to literally mold a quirky hero named Klaymen out of a clever knack for presentation and a



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rating

were pretty significant additions. By 1998, however, we've seen all of this in newer and more refined games, and *X-Men* just doesn't hold up in the gameplay department anymore.

Graphics and sound are another mixed bag. Probe says that the delay in release was due mainly to having to fit the larger backgrounds and characters into the small amount of PlayStation RAM without having the game slow down to a crawl. The good news is that after two years worth of work, developers solved the problem. The bad news is that to solve the program, they had to cut out a lot of character animation and keep the game speed at its slowest level. It's a pretty harsh trade-off and hardly a practical solution since it compromises the already questionable gameplay.

Overall, if you crave 2D fighting fare, you can do worse than this game, but you can also do much better. *What X-Men: Children of the Atom* mostly proves is that companies should learn to stop projects before they spiral past the time when they're relevant.

Rating: ★★

Grandia

Publisher: GameArts
Developer: GameArts

As Saturn winds down around the world, its last generation games give a glimpse into what Saturn could have been if Sega had decided to continue development for just a bit longer — or gotten more support early on. *Grandia* is arguably the crowning achievement in Saturn RPGs, pushing both hardware and software to the edge.

The designers have created an incredibly well-integrated 3D world, using complex models and impeccable sound production to bring vibrancy to the game world of Perm in a way simple bitmaps can't. Everything is alive — the people move, the canals flow with water, and seagulls glide in the air currents above the city. Like *Shining Force II*, *Grandia's* 3D is much more immersive than skewed perspective, static backgrounds.

Saturn



Despite the fact that Saturn isn't designed as a polygon pusher, Grandia does a fine job of making a world out of them, and it tells a story too.

In making the inevitable comparison to *Final Fantasy VII*, *Grandia* stacks up quite favorably. Where Square prefers to overwhelm players with apocalyptic storylines and imposing graphic design, GameArts chooses to engross the player through smaller, more humorous, more human plots. The

combat system is also the closest to a real-time tactical engine as traditional RPGs have come, and players can explore a wide range of actions within it — another first.

However, if any game shows off the limitations of the hardware, it's this one. GameArts sacrifices frame rate for detail, which adds a slight but noticeable stutter to movement. Also, villages and dungeon sections seem smaller than average, possibly to cram themselves into the Saturn's 2MB memory space.

Despite these shortcomings, *Grandia's* design and innovation will be a benchmark for future RPGs in the 32-bit generation and beyond. The only strike *Grandia* has against it, at least for U.S. gamers, is that there are currently no plans to release this game Stateside (there's a rumor it may make it here as one of the first wave of Katana games, but it remains just that — a rumor). It will be missed.

Rating: ★★★★★

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Saturn

Shine on



Players can cast Final Fantasy-style spells with no noticeable load time

Shining Force III

Publisher: Sega

Developer: Camelot Software Planning

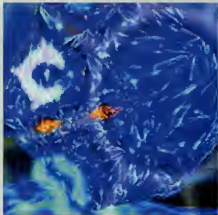
As the 1990s draw to a close, the console RPG is finally evolving with the rest of the market. Although Final Fantasy VII uses polygonal characters and Dark Savior features a polygonal world, it's games like Shining Force II that truly begin to use 3D as a means to push the nature of RPG worlds and how they play.

Camelot Software Planning, the same company behind the original Shining Force series on Genesis, uses 3D to literally bring depth to the game environment. Where previous designers had relied on meticulously designed bitmaps to portray

villages and mountains, Shining Force II's cities are cities — players can peek around corners, look under bridges, and see the far side of a building — all the things that were previously impossible.

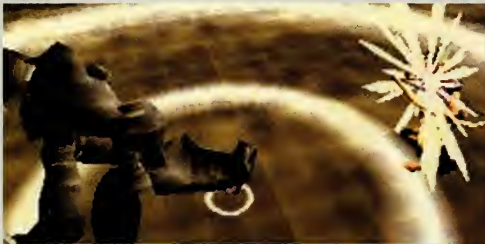
It isn't gratuitous 3D, either. Combat now takes elevation into account for movement and damage while dungeon design takes advantage of 3D by actually hiding treasure instead of leaving it out with a huge "Take Me" sign on it. Overall, Camelot shows that Saturn can indeed create high-quality 3D without compromising frame rate, load time, or resolution.

Yet another entry in the fading Saturn library lets the system go out with its head held high



Still, Shining Force IV is a smaller step forward than GameArts' Grandia. Although the look has changed, it's basically a Shining Force game that just happens to be 3D. The emphasis is still on tactics, and neither the interface nor the gameplay has changed significantly from its predecessors. In the end, though, it's a worthy upgrade to a game series that's already proven itself. When it comes to the U.S. later this year, it will be a graceful end note to the Saturn's often troubled history.

Rating: ★★★★★



It's the same shining game but with a few enhancements. It's a new generation of RPGs — 3D is here to stay

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Air Warrior III is aerial combat in its purest form — dogfighting one-on-one with machine guns as the only weapon

Air Warrior III

Publisher: Interactive Magic
Developer: Kesmai Studios

If there is one thing that Interactive Magic does well, it's flight simulations. The company has built a solid reputation on past hits, and *Air Warrior IV*, despite a few minor hiccups, lives up to that reputation.

Air Warrior II is one of a growing number of flight sims that look back to the past, when dogfighting skill determined air superiority and the best weapon was a fast machine gun. This is a test of flying skill, not one of advanced weaponry.

With campaigns from both World Wars and the Korean War, *Air Warrior II* has plenty of missions to fly — more than 450, in fact. The sheer number of individual missions, combined with a very realistic flight engine ensures a solid single-player experience. A mission editor is included with the game to allow budding pilots a chance to create original missions that can then be used in the game.

As a flight simulation *Air Warrior II* is great. The planes are historically accurate and behave as they should. However, not everyone enjoys a game in which you can stall out and crash on a moment's notice. With that in mind, *Air Warrior II* allows the user to customize the realism settings. On the most basic level, *Air Warrior II* is more of an arcade game than a sim — something that is sure to broaden the game's appeal.

Overall *Air Warrior II* is a fairly solid effort, but a few problems keep it from being an instant classic. The first is a conflict with the SoundBlaster

AWF32/64 cards. It can be fixed by a quick visit to the Interactive Magic web site, but this is something that can be quite annoying, particularly because the error messages direct players to the local help files, which have none of the promised information. Users without web access would find themselves playing sans sound.

The other major issue with *Air Warrior II* concerns its online gaming features — supposedly a major selling point. The box promises free online multiplayer dogfights. Unfortunately, the online portion of the game is still in beta testing. With the recent trend towards online gaming, it is great to see a developer include this feature, but if it isn't finished when the product ships, it shouldn't be advertised on the box.

Rating: ★★★

Faery Tale Adventure II: Halls of the Dead

Publisher: Encore Software
Developer: The Dreamer's Guild

Following up on its moderately successful predecessor, *Faery Tale Adventure II: Halls of the Dead* continues the exploits of three brothers — strong Julian, agile Philip, and wise Kevin, as they once again try to rid the world of evil.

The story is pretty standard, and the few feels like something ripped directly out of Ultima VI, but with many more frustrations. At any given moment, a player can control only one brother, and the other two simply wander

around in the general vicinity. "Wander around" meaning that they don't exactly follow the character being controlled, which means losing a loose brother behind a wall or bush while the character under direct control runs from one place to the other.

Combat and magic work a bit more effectively. As soon as an attack begins, the game moves into turn-based mode, enabling the player to control the actions of one character and letting the other two brothers fend for themselves. Usually this works well, but jumping from one brother to the next can get rather tedious. Especially since once a given character has performed some action, all the other characters take their turn, and the computer AI doesn't always handle specialized functions like spell-casting.

These and other interface difficulties keep *Halls of the Dead* from being what it could have been — a great, fun, interesting adventure. The



The pretty graphics are a sharp counterpoint to the horrid interface in Halls of the Dead

graphics are very pretty, with bright colors and a variety of monsters, and the story isn't bad. All in all, unless your desire for a game with a sane interface, give this one a miss.

Rating: ★★

NASCAR Racing 2

Publisher: Sierra Online
Developer: Papyrus

There used to be a time when being DOS-only was a sign of pride. Game developers worked diligently to avoid Windows 95 and its pitfalls. Today, there is no excuse for a game being DOS-only because it just hinders it, as one will discover with *NASCAR Racing 2*.

The biggest problem with *NASCAR Racing 2* is the fact that it will not recognize everything in the system automatically, and these days, few players want to configure everything manually just to make it work. Even then, there are no guarantees because some peripherals like joysticks only support Windows 95. As a result, these

items are unusable with the game. But what really hurts is that it only supports Rendition-based 3D accelerators — nothing else. Why? Well, it might have something to do with the fact that Sierra sells a Rendition-based 3D card of its own.

Despite the lack of a native Windows 95 interface, once the game is installed and running, it plays surprisingly well. Control is very responsive, even when using just the keyboard, and the computer opponents are outthere. *NASCAR Racing 2* has a high level of realism — this isn't an arcade racing game. Winning will require practice and patience.

NASCAR Racing 2 goes beyond simple racing, though. Sure, it's possible to race in circles for hours, but all is for naught if the car breaks down. *NASCAR Racing 2* utilizes a realistic damage system that requires pit stops at regular intervals in order to keep the car in top form. Additionally, there is a garage area



NASCAR Racing 2 plays well but is limited by virtue of being a DOS-only application

where players can optimize the car for each track. A paint shop is even included for the more creative types out there to customize the car's look.

As a whole *NASCAR Racing 2* is a solid example of what a racing game should be. However, the lack of Windows 95 support really hurts, and it makes the game seem dated. Had it been Windows 95 native with 3Dfx or at least had DirectX support, *NASCAR Racing 2* would be a must-have. Papyrus is, after all, about the best racing sim developer on the planet. But it's time for the team to wake up and smell the '90s — the late '90s, anyway.

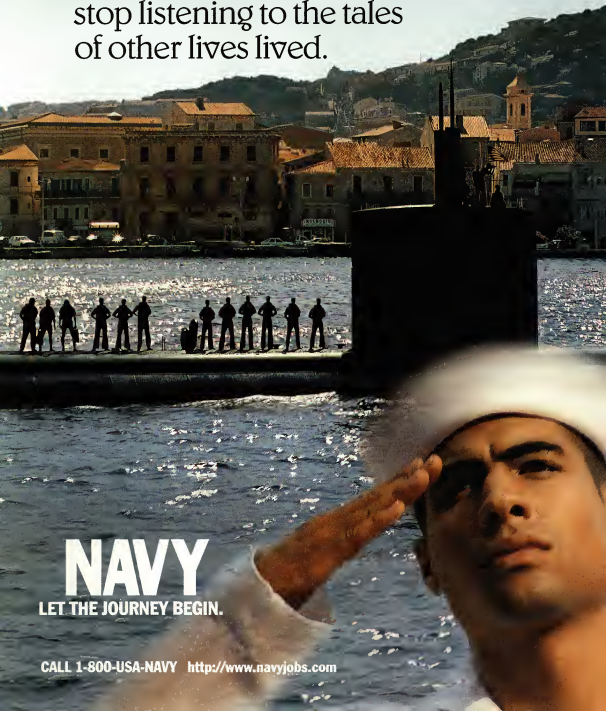
Rating: ★★★

Red Baron II

Publisher: Sierra
Developer: Dynamix

The follow-up to the classic WWI PC flight sim *Red Baron*, the aptly titled *Red Baron II* offers the requisite advances in graphics and features to once again elevate Dynamix's creation to the upper tier of flight simulations.

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For the first time in a while, the flight engine is as good as the FMV

Wing Commander Prophecy

Publisher: **Electronic Arts**
Developer: **Origin**

After nearly being lost to FMV madness, a venerated series finally comes back to its roots



It's no secret that the Wing Commander series has spawned some of the best-selling titles for Electronic Arts over the span of its lifetime. However, as it followed the elusive promise of a Hollywood-Silicon valley connection, the series slid dangerously close to becoming everything that made FMV games so reviled, emphasizing the production values of the video, with less effort being put into the actual flight and combat.

Wing Commander Prophecy, however, marks a turnaround for the series, as for the first time, the game graphics look as polished as the FMV

The new, 3D-accelerated graphic engine juices up the gameplay with highly detailed ships, kinetic environments, and incredible special effects. Even the massive capital ships that players must destroy are extraordinary, and complex structures actually look as good close-up as they do from a distance.

Control is tight, and the missions offer a great deal of variety for those players tired of simple seek-and-destroy objectives common to past entries in the series. During crucial points in the actual game, players will even have to make quick

moral decisions with no clear answer at hand. These difficult decisions affect how other characters react down the line and change events in later missions.

The few criticisms that can be leveled at this game are that it simply feels too short, and it's rather curiously missing any sort of multiplayer mode. Other than that, Wing Commander Prophecy offers enough solid gameplay and eye-catching graphics to satisfy even the most demanding space combat fan.

Rating: ★★★★★



The enemy spacecraft in Wing Commander Prophecy are a bit unoriginal, though — they seem inspired by Babylon 5

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rating



Few flight sims re-create the nuances of canvas-and-wood dogfighting as well as *Red Baron II*

The game's most enticing features are the environments that include dynamic, computer AI-generated activity within a 100-mile radius of the player's squadron. This creates an authentic, active world in which such disparate events as a dogfight already are in progress, or a base being bombed occurs independently of the actions of the player. Against the background of this enticing re-creation of WWI's Western Front is the highlight of *Red Baron II*'s gameplay — intense, entertaining dogfight action.

In this day and age, when the flight simulation market is flooded with technology-laden jet fighter sims that seem cold and despondent, the dogfights in *Red Baron II* stand out for their exhilarating nature. No missiles, no radar, just silk-corded knights of the sky diving it out the old-fashioned way. The key to the excellence of the dogfight experience may be the game's superior computer AI, which realistically represents the capabilities of all kinds of pilots, from novices to legendary aces. The developers of the title should be commended for the intensity and accuracy of the dogfight experience communicated in the game: it is exceptional.

In terms of features, *Red Baron II* fulfills just about every flight sim expectation, with 22 pilotable aircraft and a selection of single-mission or campaign modes. The pilot's career in campaign mode is affected by mission

performance, which results in unique paths each time through. The missions offer a nice variety of objectives, ranging from outright dogfighting, to one-on-one confrontations with aces, to escort, reconnaissance, and even ground attack missions. The inclusion of a mission generator and multiplayer capability ensure no lack of depth.

If there are any particular areas in *Red Baron II* that aren't top-notch, it's perhaps the graphics and sound. The graphics feature high-resolution, texture-mapped terrain, but ultimately the game falls short of the 3D-accelerated graphics that have increasingly become the standard for PC games. The sound effects are merely average and the military background music is mildly amusing in its similarity to the Hogan's Heroes theme.

Overall, *Red Baron II* is a fine addition to the series, and despite some small, technical shortcomings, it establishes itself as one of the most entertaining flight experiences on the market today.

Rating: ★★★★★

Streets of Sim City

Publisher: Maxis
Developer: Maxis

Whenever a well-known license is used to launch a new game, the editors here at *Next Generation* cringe. At times the result can be wonderful software,

but more often than not, it's a poorly conceived notion that manages to get shelf space on name recognition alone (*Rabel Assault*, anybody?). *Streets of Sim City* falls into the latter category.

On its surface, the idea behind *Streets of Sim City* sounds like a blast — players drive around in beefed up combat vehicles, and the only goal is to blow opponents to smithereens. In practice, the game fails in practically every category.

Enemy AI can be summed up in three words: Chase the player. Don't expect any fancy maneuvering or surprises from the computer. The opposing vehicles will quite simply drive straight towards you, then, when they're close enough, they shoot. Not surprisingly, weapons are an incredibly effective weapon.

Realism is another problem that seems to plague the game. Granted,

any game that has players doing little more than driving around blowing things up should be taken with a grain of salt, but one would think that a combat game would handle damage in an intelligent way. Amazingly, it seems impossible to damage one's own car. Speeding into the side of a building at 70mph does little more than force a quick stop.

The only really interesting feature in *Streets of Sim City* is the ability to import, and then drive through, environments created in *Sim City 2000* in all their glory. That is, assuming that you have *Sim City 2000* loaded on your machine, of course. If you don't, then this feature is more or less a useless, if tantalizing, gimmick.

When all is said and done, *Streets of Sim City* is better left on the store shelves. With its surprisingly high system requirements (166 and 32MB of RAM at a minimum), the game already has a limited audience by necessity. Even if your system can handle it, it isn't worth the cash. Pass on this one and dig out *Interstate 76* instead — same idea, much more fun.

Rating: ★

Virus

Publisher: Sir Tech
Developer: Kidum
Multimedia

After playing *Virus* for the first time, one has to wonder if the developers were inspired by the movie *Tron*. *Virus* can best be described as a cross between *Descent* and a realtime strategy game. Your computer has been infected by a malevolent virus, and the only way to prevent a total loss is to enter the computer and take on the virus bit by bit until it's been eradicated. It's an interesting concept, and one that makes it somewhat ironic the game has the problems it does.

First, the good parts. *Virus* is unique in that the levels are created by reeding in the player's own directory structure from the PC on which it's being played. This means that for every system it's played on, the game will have a different level layout. The more creative will note it also means that game maps can be changed around simply by adding or removing files and directories from the system.

The main game is strategy-oriented. Resources of kilobytes are collected from various files in the system and used to build structures and vehicles. Every item has a distinct, yet limiting purpose. There are no well-rounded units to be had. The forces the player has to be constantly on guard, as the virus can attack at any time.

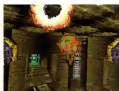
Easily the next best thing about *Virus* is the ability to explore the computer from the inside. Units can be



Anything goes on the Streets of Sim City — but not very much of it is any good

ordered to move around the system autonomously, but at times the player must take control of a unit, be it an attack craft or a kb collector, and adventure through the system. Movement through the computer feels very much like playing *Descent*. There is complete freedom of movement, and everything is seen from a first-person perspective. However, the controls are somewhat basic, as movement is limited to the keyboard.

Most of the system environment is generated by the game, but individual



Sometimes the best way to get rid of a virus is simply to blow it away

files are quickly recognized. For example, when gathering resources from a picture file, portions of the picture will be displayed on the walls of the room that represents that file. The most important files are the system files, if the virus manages to corrupt the Windows directory, then all is lost.

Now the downside: *Virus*, as shipped, is full of bugs. Thankfully, it doesn't come infected with any viruses, but palette problems, shaky 3Dfx support, and other serious flaws keep the game from being at all enjoyable.

There's also a strange quirk in the game — when players move down the directory structure, then turn and go back the way they came, they don't always end up back where they started. That was kind of fun in the original *Zork* but really has no place here.

In theory, by the time this is printed, there should be a patch on the Sir Tech web site that fixes most of these problems. As shipped, however, it's almost unplayable. Add another star if you find the patch.

Rating: ★★

Online



Building and defending your bridges are the keys to winning in *Netstorm*, where every man really is an island

Netstorm

Publisher: **Activision**
Developer: **Titanic**

After a long year of *C&C* and *WarCraft* clones, one has to wonder whether anybody has any new ideas in the realtime strategy world. However, while Activision's low-profile *Netstorm* has shipped with little fanfare, it's a good first step towards pushing the evolution of the game.

Netstorm differs from its realtime brethren most noticeably in its environment. All combat takes place in a realm high above the ground called the Serenisphere. To expand their control, players must link floating islands using randomly generated bridge pieces in an almost Tetris-like fashion. All the while they must also be gathering storm crystals, building energy generators, and placing assorted military units.

The units are an interesting mix of technology and religion, and in a bold move, are mostly stationary. This means that most combat in *Netstorm* is won, not by units running around shooting randomly (Red Alert), but by tactical

planning and placement of both offensive and defensive lines. While there are a few mobile units in the game, most are minor pieces compared to the far heavier land-bound units.

The goal of each game is to sacrifice your opponent's priest on the altar (hey, we're not making this up), which not only increases your ranking, but also allows you access to more powerful weapons as the game goes on.

The game was designed from the ground up with free internet play in mind and supports up to eight players simultaneously, remaining quite stable with even a 28.8 connection. The eight-player free-for-all is where this game really shines, with constant alliance negotiations and border disputes. In fact, the good *Netstorm* player will know how to manage not only the tactics of a large, ongoing, online conflict, but also the politics of it.

Netstorm is not only something different in a crowded market, but it's also well thought through and fun as hell to play. Kudos to Titanic for bucking the trend, even if it's only a little.

Rating: ★★★★★

Tanarus

Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **Sony**

Tanarus is an example of both the best and worst aspects of online gaming. On the one hand, \$9.95 a month is a steep price (especially since there is no one-player game) and adds up after only a few months of play. On the other hand, *Tanarus'* design, augmented by strong social options, forms a highly playable game that continues to have life many hours after purchase.

At its core, *Tanarus* is a rehashed version of the old *Age* classic *Battlezone*, reset in a city and reworked for five-man teams. Players on each team control a tank customized to their liking, with several different tank models to choose from and literally dozens of weapons and accessories. Once the tank is outfitted, the mission is to go out into the virtual battlefield, capture enemy way stations, and eventually capture its base. The key here is strategy, which the tanks use up at a frightful rate. Luckily, when a way station is captured, it becomes an energy source for players and everybody else on their team.

Where *Tanarus* really works well is in

its subtle enforcement of teamwork.

Players are free to roam as they wish, but soon they realize that to get anywhere in this game, they must learn to work with their teammates to accomplish their goals. At the simplest level this means making sure they're always with a partner. At the most complicated of levels it means a well-organized unit can pull off some incredible tactical maneuvers that play to its strengths as a team.

Ultimately it's the cooperative social interaction that elevates *Tanarus* above and beyond what most internet games have tried to be (deathmatch) and keeps the player coming back for more. Sadly, this comes with one of the steepest learning curves of any online game — it takes hours of practice to become even moderately competent.

While the graphics and sound have been kept to a minimum to reduce latency, they're by no means ugly, and with 3D acceleration, there are enough special effects to keep almost anyone happy. At \$9.95 a month, *Tanarus* isn't the greatest value for everybody, but for those with the persistence and skill to become good at the game, it's worth the time and money.

Rating: ★★★★★



An emphasis on teamwork is what makes *Tanarus* stand out

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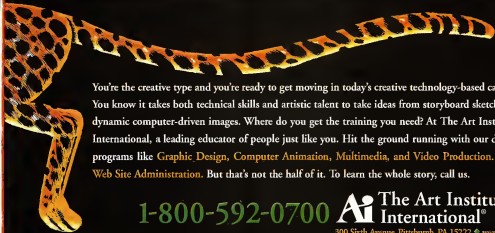
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l e t t e r s

Write of passage

Thanks for the coverage on the Vigilance game in the Alphas section of **NG 38**. Please note, however, the following correction: While the models for the various levels were created in 3D Studio MAX, the radiosity lighting effects were achieved with Lightscape. Any Channel has worked closely with Lightscape Technologies for almost two years now in testing and evolving Lightscape's pioneering radiosity technology for realtime 3D games.

Brian Yen
President
Any Channel, Inc

Thanks for the clarification.

There are no pinball games available for console systems! I know that successful console games are often parts of successful computer and arcade games. So why haven't any of the console developers done this with pinball? There have been advances in pinball over the years, just as there have been advances in computer and other arcade games. They are no longer dull and uninteresting. The joysticks of today's console systems are made for Pinball. And can you imagine playing a 3D pinball game on a 27" TV with surround sound? That blows a 15" monitor with drinky speakers totally away. Teenage and young adult males are not the only ones who play videogames. Developers seem to forget that. Do you have any insights on this oversight?

LeahDax@aol.com

There are a couple of pinball games for consoles, including *Pro Pinball* and *True Pinball*, both for PlayStation. Unfortunately, neither of those are very good. We've heard, however, of a very exciting

pinball game in the works for Nintendo 64.

I just finished reading the February '98 issue of **Next Generation** and came across a review of Working Designs' action/RPG *Alundra*. I was quite amused when I read that the author felt as if the graphics were low grade and outdated. I have to disagree strongly. I feel there is nothing better on the planet, especially for RPGs, than colorful, top-down, 2D graphics.

The current 3D hype in the videogaming industry has upset me quite a bit. I don't feel it is fair for us, as gamers, to have to sacrifice valuable gameplay just for a bit of "revolutionary" eye candy. I particularly feel this way in the area of RPGs. Don't get me wrong — I am one of the world's biggest Square Soft RPG fans there is (I even learned Japanese just so I could play the *Final Fantasy* games that were never released in the U.S.), but I was a little upset when I found out that *FFVII* was going to be done in 3D. My reactions were similar when I played through the game. The game itself, storyline especially, was excellent, but I feel some of its greatness was lost due to the 3D field and world map views. It was a lot more fun in the old days when you didn't have to rotate the map just to be able to tell where you were heading, or press select so you knew where the exits and your characters were.

How do you at **NG** feel about the current 3D wave deterring game companies from producing games that are as great as they were on the older systems, especially the SNES?

Spill10@aol.com

Frankly, we're surprised you even

have to ask. The 2D artwork of the 16-bit era was often beautiful, especially in Square titles, but the move into three dimensions has only made them look even better as far as we're concerned. It's made them seem more real and immersive and helped bring the characters to life in a way that's not really possible using 2D art. Of course, making a game in 3D doesn't automatically make it better, and it has brought up a few new gameplay issues that need ironing out (rotating camera angles among them), but all things being equal, the third dimension is a definite plus. Anyone care to argue otherwise?

Each and every issue, I am treated to your esteemed columnists and reviewers lamenting the dearth of original gaming concepts. "There are far too many first-person shooters with the same tired plot." "The gaming companies will turn out some lame-ass clone rather than put in the work to develop a compelling new concept," etc., etc.

Why then, do you consistently feature interviews with the "giants of the industry" where we are subject to some truly inane rambling? The following quote from Dave Perry in your issue 38 article "A Meeting of the Minds" is a prime example. I support Dave's freedom to express any opinion he wishes, but is this what the **NG** staff considers print-worthy insight on the gaming industry?

"We have a prostitute character in *Messiah*. It's the first game where you get to kill hookers. There have been girls in games for a long time, but *Lara* set the breast size to 'large' and that changed everything. The technology is here to make a

woman look like a woman — long hair versus short hair."

There are so many adolescent and bizarrely inept items of note in this quote that I do not know where to begin. Is this the big feature in *Messiah*? We get to kill hookers? Will other companies tap into the "hooker-killing" demographic? What is the **NG** staff's take on Perry's chronology of game evolution?

- 1) Pong (no boys, no girls)
- 2) Mario (a boy)
- 3) Lots of girls in games (with small breasts)
- 4) Lara (larger breasts)
- 5) Kill hookers

What does long or short hair have to do with making a woman "look like a woman"? I am thoroughly lost here. Please tell me that Dave Perry is not the brilliant standard bearer for this new medium. That would be far too depressing. When the game developers of today envision how their products will evolve, is this the sum of their creative vision? If so, it's gonna be a loooong, dry haul before we get out of this creative desert.

R. Smith
rsmith@etcity.com

A fair question, although in Perry's defense, it's not always possible, when reading a transcribed interview, to distinguish deadpan humor from serious commentary. Frankly, when it comes to Dave Perry, we're often as stumped as anyone.

A friend of mine was paralyzed in a BMX accident and I was wondering if there was a hands-free type of controller for any system. He has a computer and can play games with a trackball and a pencil that he holds in his mouth.

I would appreciate it if you could help me locate any type of device.

scarpen@hotmail.com

Anyone know of any hands-free controllers? We remember a head-tracking mouse for the Mac (the "Flying Mouse"), but that was years ago.

In regards to the letter from "SAMSON" at Concentric (NG 38), it seems to me that the magazine does itself a great disservice in qualifying such idiotic tripe by publishing it for a national audience. In so doing, you're giving our friendly Neanderthal exactly what he wants: attention. Reaping the few moral spoils in your "we're better than you; so much so, in fact, that we deny not to even acknowledge you" response is hardly excusable — not to mention contradictory. You've already satisfied his need to be heard, answered his inadequacy. Your readers presume you're above such nonsense — you're wasting valuable ink.

Marshall
mvotta@lsd.bungi.com

For the first time, the number of letters we've received this issue condemning our printing of moronic letters has outstripped the number of moronic letters we've received. We get the message. Although we still happily reserve the right to print the more funny letters we get in the "sarcasm corner," we won't be giving a platform to people like Shorty8079@aol.com, who wrote this month to let us know that (among other things), "I WOULD NEVER SUBSCRIBE TO SUCH STUPID MAGAZINE." And, we'll also break a rule to print a purely gushing letter (see below). In fact, we considered printing only praising letters this issue, but we've decided to wait till next Christmas.

First off, I would just like to say that with the February issue of *Next Generation*, you

guys have cemented yourselves as the MUST-BUY gaming magazine on the market today. Everything was excellent and puts the other mags to shame. All the interviews were very informative, as were the reviews. But the best part, BY FAR, was the *HARDCORE* gamer's test!! What a brilliant idea! This is the kind of article which I love to read, and I scored pretty well on it! I laughed all the way through it, and many fond memories came to mind! The *hardcore* stories from the game industry people complemented the article well. You need more of that! May I suggest a Part 2? Maybe the readers can send in their own *hardcore* traits. You could even make it into a regular column. I think many people would appreciate that. Those kind of articles are the most fun to read! Thanks for listening and keep up the excellent work! You're *HARDCORE!*

Sid44@aol.com

Thanks, Sid. We'll address your points after the next letter.

I think there should have been one extra question at the end of the *hardcore* gamer test: After taking the quiz, you've actively tried to do the actions you missed in order to increase your score. By the way, can I have a copy of NG 17 (One more point for me, yippie!)

sonspidy@inter.net

Done. If you went back to try to increase your score, give yourself an extra-credit point. By the way, let us take this opportunity to thank everyone who has sent new questions or anecdotes to hardcore@next-generation.com. We'll be printing some of the entries next month and we're considering starting a monthly column of *hardcore* gamer anecdotes. So keep those anecdotes coming. Remember, the person who submits the best anecdote wins both a complete set of *Next Generation* back issues and a lifetime subscription to the magazine.

I'd like to put my own little comment into the raging consoles vs. computers debate. As a *hardcore* gamer (hey, I passed the test!), I have to say that when assessing a game machine, price shouldn't even be a factor. If you like games, then a computer has the advantage in flexibility, complexity, and graphic capability. The fact that it costs more than a good used car is irrelevant. A computer can be used for many things other than games, and as the turn of the century approaches, it is becoming more and more apparent that if you want to make anything of your life, you will probably need to have a computer in the home as well as the workplace anyway! I am not trying to say that consoles are bad. Quite the opposite — they are remarkable for the one thing they can do that the computer can't — bring games affordably into the home for the average person as well as the *hardcore* gamer. But when the day is done, if games are the issue, price shouldn't be.

Aaron Clifford
egoant@email.msn.com

Aaron, we couldn't have put it better ourselves.

I am 28 years old and have been playing videogames since Pong. I suppose by your definition I am a nongamer. Several months after I got my first Mac, I purchased a 2X CD-ROM drive with *Myst*. It was what I had always dreamed of in gaming. A totally immersive environment, gorgeous graphics, and a beautiful, nonintrusive soundtrack. *Riven* is to *Myst* what *The Lord of the Rings* is to *The Hobbit*. I played *Riven* with my mouth hanging open most of the time. I felt as if I could charter a plane and actually go to this mystical place that looked almost as real as reality itself.

As to whether or not the puzzles in *Myst* and *Riven* are totally logical. Why should they be? What person who has something as powerful as a linking



For the most part, readers enjoyed taking our February *hardcore* gamer test.

book would just leave it lying around? No one thinks it is illogical when James Bond has to find some secret way into a building and then must decode a door lock, hack into a computer, all just to gain access to some secret nuclear weapon. We just say it's good entertainment. Besides, if we had a secret nuclear weapon, wouldn't we hide it too? To say that *Myst* and *Riven* "make themselves very likable to nongamers" is a discredit to the true gamers who love these games and the wonderful team who created them. To use your word, I am a gourmet when it comes to videogames and now I just need to find the right wine to go with the delectable feast that is *Riven*.

M.W. Welsh
sianor@neo.iun.com

P.S. I wouldn't dream of canceling my subscription to your fine publication.

What can we say? There are some gourmets who like McDonald's. The trouble with the James Bond analogy is that James Bond never had to run somewhere on the other side of the world, decode some obscurely based numbering system, then carry that information in his head and use it to play music and open a door. Puzzles should be organic to the world, not arbitrarily constructed just to show how clever the designers are.

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